

Pedagogical Perspectives on Teaching Community Development

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Community development coursework is scattered throughout the public affairs curricula. It is sometimes found as a stand-alone class, but more commonly as a component of an economic development, urban planning, or international development class. This symposium grew out of a series of conversations with colleagues about the role that community development programs and courses serve in public affairs education. I was interested in hearing others' thoughts about community development as a subfield of public policy and public administration (rather than of social work or planning), and particularly about the importance of social inequality and cultural competency as it relates to community development curricula.

Community development, as a concept and in practice, is amorphous to some extent. O'Connor (2008) notes that "community development is a time-honored tradition in America's response to poverty, but its meaning is notoriously hard to pin down" (p. 9). Scholars, however, have attempted to offer definitions: Rubin & Rubin (1986) define community development as involving "local empowerment through organized groups of people acting collectively to control decisions, projects, programs, and policies that affect them as a community" (p. 6). Frank and Smith (1999) offer a similar definition, noting that "community development is a planned evolution of all aspects of community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural). It is a process whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems" (p. 6).

In practice, community development is most often directed at addressing poverty and the co-occurring issues of unemployment, homelessness, or blight. Community development is therefore more synonymous with public housing or economic development and growth than with collective action, partly as a result of federal urban policy (O'Connor, 2008) and partly as a result of how we understand poverty (Bradshaw, 2007). In fact, one of the biggest criticisms of contemporary community development is the emphasis on economic growth, rather than community mobilization (see DeFilippis, 2008; Shragge, 2013). Community participation and mobilization are, or at least should be, central to community development programs.

Moreover, since community development attempts to revitalize communities and build capacity in low-income areas, and by extension often with marginalized groups (such as racial and ethnic minorities or women), it raises questions: How does community development fit into public administration? How are community development practitioners and public managers trained to work with marginalized populations in order to yield more successful community development outcomes? And, what are the best practices for integrating cultural competency into community development coursework? This symposium begins to tackle these questions by sharing insights from two public affairs faculty members who teach community development, whether as a stand-alone class (Hatcher, this issue) or as a component of a public management course (Saldivar, this issue).

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Community development is most often associated with the Community Development Corporation (CDC), a community-controlled nonprofit development organization. The term *community development* gained popularity in the 1960s with the rise of the CDC, most notably in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of New York City (Stoecker, 1997). These organizations work in collaboration with state and local governments to revitalize low-income communities through a range of programs, including state and local advocacy, housing development and assistance, job training, child care, and budget/credit counseling (National Congress for Community Economic Development [NCCED], 2005). Since their initial inception in the 1960s, the number of CDCs has grown immensely; based on the most recent census of CDCs, there are 4,600 spread across the country (NCCED, 2005).

However, the community development field is much broader than just CDCs. Ferguson and Stoutland (1999) argue that the community development system spans sectors and levels; it includes public, private, and nonprofit organizations, and relies on local, state, and federal institutions. For example, the public sector plays a significant role in facilitating community development activity. In 2014, there were more than 1,200 city, county, and state government Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) recipients with 7,250 local governments able to directly or indirectly access these funds. Federal CDBG programs have allocated over \$144 billion to local community development funding since 1974 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014).

Neither the number of CDCs nor the amount of CDBG funding fully captures the size of the community development field. But what is evident from these two examples is that community development activity takes place in thousands of jurisdictions across the country and is therefore an important task within public affairs. As such, community development should be examined and taught in public affairs programs.

TEACHING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND COMMUNITY BETTERMENT

Community development offers an interesting lens for students of public affairs to examine how practitioners and policy makers attempt to address local social problems, such as homelessness, poverty, unemployment, or political underrepresentation, and foster community betterment. Most public administration and policy educational programs offer courses related to community development; courses in local government, nonprofit administration, urban policy, economic development, international development, and planning all represent components of community development. Yet community development represents a small subfield of public affairs. In fact, only three public affairs programs offer concentrations specifically in community development: University of North Carolina–Greenboro, Rutgers University–Camden, and The New School (Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration [NASPAA], 2014).¹

Hatcher's article, titled "Teaching the Importance of Community Betterment to Public Managers: Community Development in NASPAA Programs," offers an important contribution to the literature on community development, by situating the concept and practice squarely within public administration. He presents an overview of community development concentrations and courses within public affairs programs, and, in his analysis, finds that most courses focus on economic development, international development, or planning. Hatcher argues for a different approach: one that emphasizes the asset model of community development and relies on multiple pedagogical tools to connect theory and practice for students.

The asset model of community development (see Green & Haines, 2008; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) defines community development as "the bettering of social, political, and economic institutions in a community" (Hatcher, this issue). The asset model of community development is therefore differentiated from economic development, for example. The asset model emphasizes "public participation, trust-building ...and local assets in the development and promotion of a community's vision" (Hatcher, this issue; see also Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

As such, Hatcher points out, if the goal of community development is to revitalize communities by building human, social, physical, financial, cultural, and political capital, “then public administration has a significant role in helping teach public managers the administrative aspects of development and the assets model.”

Hatcher also presents a variety of tools that pair theory with practice, including development of a community participation plan, asset mapping, and a unique SimCity simulation exercise. In the end, all of the course assignments used in Hatcher’s class seek to teach public managers about economic inequality, refocus attention away from social problems to local assets, and promote an understanding of community-defined community betterment.

TEACHING CULTURAL COMPETENCY

It is not only important that public managers and community development practitioners possess the intellectual skills and understand the best practices for promoting community betterment; it is also essential that they are able to work within a heterogeneous group of individuals different from themselves. As Hatcher’s article points out, community visioning and public participation is an important component of community development work. It is likely, given the nature of community development, that practitioners will work with communities different from themselves in some way. And as Briggs (2008) has pointed out, community development planning requires that we understand different “communication codes, especially in multicultural settings” (p. 239).

In her article, “Team-Based Learning: A Model for Democratic and Culturally Competent 21st Century Public Administrators,” Saldivar argues that “public affairs curricula must unequivocally include cultural competency discourse and prepare and empower students so that as practitioners, they are able to successfully address complex community-based problems guided by principles of social equity and diversity” (this issue). Her article presents a unique, empirically tested approach for fostering critical thinking and cultural competency in the public administration classroom. Team-based learning (TBL) is a form of cooperative

learning that places emphasis on team building, accountability, and interpersonal communication.

Saldivar not only discusses the TBL method’s effectiveness, but also provides a step-by-step guide for developing and implementing TBL. TBL is grounded by the intentionality of building heterogeneous groups and challenging these groups to work together throughout the entire semester. The result is not only content learning, but also increased cultural competency. Moreover, Saldivar’s examples serve as an important illustration of how TBL is not only an important contribution to community development curricula, but a method that could be adopted in any public affairs course.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the most challenging issues faced in community development practice is the issue of insider/outsider voices. In a *Shelterforce* survey, respondents were asked how they felt about the current status of community development. One respondent noted: “The grass-roots ‘bottom up’ approach often described in the community organizing literature 40 or 50 years ago has been lost—in favor of well-funded government or privately driven efforts to tell low- and working-class people what’s good for them.” Another stated: “Too much of what is pawned off as community development today is just private developers and outside organizations building subsidized housing in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. There is no community input.” (Axel-Lute, 2013, “Thoughts on the CDC Model,” para. 5 and para. 6).

With increasing professionalization of the public affairs field, we must caution against speaking on behalf of communities, and refocus on speaking with communities. Community development coursework must emphasize the importance of community-directed community betterment and cultural competency to ensure that we meet this need. As a public, we want economic growth *and* community betterment.

This symposium is intended to be the start of a discussion about the importance of community development in public affairs education. In addition to the pedagogical tools presented here, each of the authors challenges us to think about

the importance of engaging our students in discussions about how we understand and work with and in communities. We need practitioners who understand community development and are able to communicate effectively with people different from them, especially people who have been historically marginalized in our society.

NOTE

1. These three schools are the only schools listed on NASPAA's 2012–2013 Database of Accredited Programs (available on the NASPAA website) that explicitly use the term *community development* as a program concentration option.

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