

Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth A. Tryon, with Amy Hilgendorf, eds. *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009.

### Review by Nicole Webster

*I*n *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*, Stoecker and Tryon have started a much-needed discussion about the relationships between service-learning participants and community organizations. Instead of focusing on what many researchers and practitioners want to hear, they dive into an area that many scholars have excluded from their conversations: exposing the effectiveness of service-learning. The text provides dialogue about the impact of service-learning on community organizations from a critical scholarly perspective.

Stoecker and Tryon challenge higher education scholars to think about how community members are affected by service-learning engagement. By exploring these issues, they encourage those in higher education who are facilitating these engagement projects to think about their roles as faculty members, educators, and keepers of knowledge. Questions posed include: Are service-learning activities reciprocal in nature? Does the service-learner help advance the mission and objectives of the organization, or are students just an added responsibility for a community organization staff member? Through conversations with 67 community organization staff members, the editors investigate issues that occur when students are released from the safety nets of classrooms into the world of community work and nonprofit organizations. The colorful and insightful comments of community organization staff paint a picture of how community organizations define, perceive, and evaluate service-learning.

The primary value of this book is its ability to inform scholars and practitioners about the tensions and barriers that can exist between the students participating in service-learning projects and community members, as well as the factors that influence students before they enter the community. The refreshing voices from community members clearly recommend that faculty members step up to the challenge of truly preparing students for transformative learning and engagement. Professors must help students understand epistemological differences between themselves and their community partners, and how such differences impact the ability of students to address real social problems. Without this understanding, problems and tensions will continue to arise in service-learning programs. Students will be sent to organizations without

a contextual understanding of the needs of organizations, which could lead to unexpected outcomes and inappropriate expectations for both the students and the community partners.

The book begins by asking a basic yet critical question: Who is served by service-learning? Service-learning researchers have been attempting to answer this question for years, and are still struggling with it today. According to Stoecker and Tryon, the answer is all too often influenced by the faculty member's institution's academic promotion and tenure system, or by the faculty member's focus on satisfying the needs of the student. These influences invariably shift the focus and outcomes of community engagement away from the community and toward the university students and faculty members.

University administrators are positioned to expand students' civic capacity before a service-learning endeavor. However, the vivid comments by the staff members of community organizations indicate that students were academically prepared, but lacked the civic capacity to efficiently meet the needs of their organizations. Community organizers recognized the need for faculty and universities to prepare students to become social change agents within their communities. Conversations among community organization staff members revealed that students can contribute as a short-term cadre of volunteers, but they must come to the table ready to engage and work *with*, rather than *for* the organization. For example, many students enter a community organization thinking that they are coming in to save the organization, rather than seeing themselves as individuals who are working with organization staff to address the organization's needs and issues. The emphasis of the service-learning experience should be reciprocity, and not a one-sided favoring of student academic needs.

The analysis of issues such as student investment and time spent at the students' community site revealed the struggles community organizations face when accepting service-learners. At the root of these issues was a lack of preparation for the experience and differing epistemological values, and skills, between the university participants and community organization members. Faculty members and students come to a community organization with beliefs about engagement that may differ from those of community organization members. Participants must meet on common ground to avoid jeopardizing both the work to be done, and the experiences of the students, faculty members, and community members.

Frustration with higher education community engagement stems from a number of factors. *Unheard Voices* suggests that the paucity of quality service-learning and engagement research underlies much of the tension between service-learning students and community organizations. Stoecker and Tryon eloquently point out that relationships between the service-learner and the community organization are often shaped by power relationships; organizational structures, policies, and funding; and cultural differences (university versus community). The profile of the American university faculty member as able to engage in democratic modes of meaningful work that address both local and global issues has not been realized in service-learning pedagogy. An ongoing struggle has emerged about how to create a university culture that values community organizations, while at the same time providing valuable experiences for students. Stoecker and Tryon demonstrate through their conversations that service-learning often places the needs and wants of the faculty members and students first, with the community organization merely serving as the backdrop for learning, resulting in no real engagement.

In short, this book begins to change the conversation about who is served by service-learning. It explores how university administrators and faculty members can make engagement experiences (i.e., service-learning projects) more effective for students, as well as for the community members served. *Unheard Voices* recognizes the need for universities to “respond” to the needs of society through the use of scholarship in ways that add value to society, but in a manner that supports community organizations. Faculty and staff members participating in service-learning and community engagement must take into account the role the community organization plays in the cocreation of knowledge. As Ernest Boyer (1991) pointed out, the scholarships of discovery, integration, teaching, and application form a unified puzzle that deepens how scholars do work that meets the real needs of communities. The scholarships of discovery and of application do not happen independently of one another.

## Reference

- Boyer, E. (1991). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

## ***About the Reviewer***

**Nicole Webster** is an Associate Professor at The Pennsylvania State University. She has experience in the design of civic engagement/public scholarship programs and evaluations for communities, universities, and youth development organizations domestically and internationally. She is an academician with hands-on experience in community-based research who implements research programs and projects to revitalize organizational performance and human capacity. Her research focuses on how higher education community engagement affects the social and personal development of youth in marginalized communities.