



## **Trickle-up Service and Outreach: Collaborative Research on Class Cutting with High School Students**

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**P**rior to my present academic position, I served as a high school guidance counselor in chronically under-resourced, over-crowded urban public schools for many years. Like many colleagues I yearned to do more than seemed possible to do within the constraints of the job. Large caseloads, multiple professional responsibilities (counseling, administrative, and disciplinary), and few school and community resources to address students' complex academic and personal needs meant that help often lacked sufficient persistence, depth, breadth, or follow up. Our quick fixes, while pragmatic, were Band-Aids that focused on individuals but ignored systemic issues. If these larger issues were addressed, positive effects could be felt by students and the larger school community.

Like many colleagues I wanted to do more — confront social issues that beset the community, the school, and trickled down to the students (Khaminwa, Fallis, & Opotow, 1999). This clearly required special skills and knowledge, so I enrolled in graduate school and specialized in social psychological theories at the heart of social issues: justice and conflict. I then returned to work as a guidance counselor for three years before joining the faculty at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston) four years ago. I now teach conflict theories and their applications to dispute resolution in a wide array of social contexts (e.g., interpersonal, organizational, environmental, international).

My public service and outreach, the focus of this essay, occurs in Dorchester High School, in a public school in Boston. Two seniors, Maurice Baxter and Fredo Sanon, have worked with me as co-researchers since ninth grade. Along with UMass Boston graduate students Lydia Fortune, Kirk Fallis, and Angela Khaminwa we analyzed data that addresses the question: Why do students cut class? The findings and method from our project have influenced Fredo and Maurice and are also beginning to trickle up and influence the school and the larger educational community.

This essay describes a public service and outreach initiative — a small, sustained, grassroots, collaborative effort — that has the

potential to "trickle up" to cause larger-scale, constructive social change. It describes a collaborative research project that includes university researchers and urban high school students. It describes the outcomes of this approach for the students, their school, and the larger educational community, and concludes by describing a university culture that values and supports public service and outreach.

### **Class Cutting: Background**

Cutting occurs when a student comes to school and is officially marked present, but selectively misses, 'skips,' or 'cuts' one or more classes during the school day without permission. In some high schools more than half of the students cut one or more classes regularly (Opotow 1994; Opotow, Fortune, Baxter, and Sanon 1998). Although prevalence data are rare, cutting appears to have increased markedly over the last two decades (cf., Duckworth & deJung 1996, 1989).

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Cutting one class could be harmless, but cutting is a slippery slope. With even a few cuts conceptual continuity is lost and classes become more difficult to follow, homework difficult to complete, and tests harder to pass. Grades suffer; classes are failed; progress toward graduation slows or stops. In short, cutting is the process of dropping out — a series of seemingly-insignificant decisions made hour by hour in students' everyday lives. Drop-out

research identifies cutting as a key precursor, but research examining the precursors of cutting is scant (Opotow 1994). Without empirical data that can guide effective cutting-detering efforts, "get-tough," top-down, administrative initiatives, such as "three cuts and you're out," focus on outcomes rather than root causes (Opotow 1995). Students' views about why cutting occurs and how schools could respond positively and proactively are missing.

### **Collaborative Research: Logistics of Outreach**

When I returned to high school counseling after graduate school, cutting prevalence had skyrocketed. Students, not aware that things had ever been different, viewed cutting as normal, an accepted *modus vivendi* of high school. My shock piqued their curiosity. Several students, "cutters" themselves, began interviewing their peers to examine questions they never had thought interesting before: Why, how, and when do students cut class?

Their data were rich, provocative, and difficult to interpret. To analyze it competently, I sought out experts on urban youth culture:

high school students. In Boston, an inquiry to a public school ironically directed me to an urban-scholars outreach program for middle and high school students based in my own university. The match between my concerns and the Urban Scholar's mission was a good one. Having vetted my intentions and credentials, they introduced me to interested public school administrators and a teacher at Dorchester High.

When permissions and logistics were completed, UMASS Boston graduate student, Lydia Fortune, and I began weekly meetings with eight students during the cooperating teacher's fourth-period class. Transcriptions of interviews that had been conducted previously by students with peers served as the text for our discussions, and we began collaborative qualitative data analysis. Talking about what we read and thinking out loud about what it might mean, we worked together to share our ideas openly and fully in order to identify factors and conditions that prompt class cutting. Our meetings continued for several months. The project was completed at the end of the school year.

Up to this point, I have described outreach, but I had clearly been the recipient of students' service. The next section describes how this project became public service that is beginning to serve participating students, their school, and the larger community.

### Research Outcomes as Public Service

As a result of a chance meeting with one of the students on the street the next fall and his invitation to return, the project continued. Because of inevitable attrition, several students from our group had left the school. Two students who remained, Maurice Baxter and Fredo Sanon, then sophomores, were eager for new challenges. When opportunities arose to take their knowledge about cutting "on the road," they did so with great enthusiasm. Fredo and Maurice organized and conducted a workshop on class cutting for students at the Urban Scholars annual conference for middle and high school students.

They next designed and conducted a survey and led focus groups to learn what their peers thought about cutting. In their junior year, Maurice and Fredo prepared a chapter (Sanon, Baxter, Fortune, & Opotow 1999) for a book, *Student Voices* (Shultz & Cook-Sather, in press), which features collaborative research and writing between university scholars and pre-collegiate students.

Here is how Maurice and Fredo describe the analytic work that examines complex behavior in depth and the draft revision process which requires attention to detail and persistence. Maurice says:

It was a good year. Productive. Just got done with the book [and we'll] see the finished copy in a few weeks or months. Sometimes it could get annoying. We were doing the same thing over and over. But in some way it always changed and we ended up somewhere different. But, the same thing — cutting

class — why? So many different answers and explanations! It was really annoying for a minute [chuckle]. You know that I come in sometimes — well, I didn't want to come in sometimes — but once you got something like this you got keep going with it, you can't just stop. We had to keep going over and over it. Because every time we did we came up with some more elaboration or more detail. If we just did it the first time it would not have been the same, because it would have been done just once. And every time we came in, we had something different to discuss. It was the same thing but different outcomes. It got better. Things kept coming out of it. We did get a lot out of it. Not just the research part, but the skills we got out of it. The patience, the reviewing things, the frustrations, the repetition of things — but overall it was still good. We can take it out [to make presentations] next year. Just learning things, learning about things, working with people, accepting other people's views, and respecting their views. Listening to other people's views and then trying to get one bigger or better view — trying to pull it all together. Like if I say something you all would listen and maybe you all would have something to add and then things would get better out of that process. It is like that for everybody. You would say something, we would add a little something, then Kirk and Angela would say something. We would all add a little something and it was like that the whole time.

Fredo adds:

I never did a book chapter before so I didn't know the first thing about what we had to work on. I guess it's never perfect. Every time we had a draft, I always thought it was good, it was decent. But, if you work that hard doing this, you can transfer it to something else. You always know that good is not enough. You can make it better.

As Fredo and Maurice set out to challenge themselves, to present our findings, and to test their knowledge with peers, they embarked on a program of public service and outreach that not only contributed immediately useful knowledge about cutting to schools, but also modeled the usefulness of empirical research, collaborative methods, and the importance of student voice.

Project-related activities have begun to trickle up and serve the students, their school, and the wider educational community in exciting ways:

- Fredo and Maurice and their teacher have described a carryover from our discussions to classroom participation.

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They note the increased prevalence of analytical, in-depth thinking and active class participation to make difficult concepts come alive.

- Fredo and Maurice model the commitment needed for research to peers. Their consistent attendance over several years demonstrates that research is engaging and rewarding, and that persevering in spite of occasional repetitive or boring tasks does not make the process any less positive. These are skills necessary for academic success.
- The students are increasingly aware of and value their own thinking, their peers' thinking, and the value of multiple perspectives.
- As individuals and as a team we have served as a methodological resource for staff members beginning school-based and collaborative projects.
- An administrator invited us to meet with the teacher committee charged with curriculum and teaching innovation. Our chapter will serve as their text and suggest ways to implement school reform; our students will serve as committee consultants.
- Neighboring schools have asked our students to speak to parents and administrators.
- It is our expectation that the book, *Student Voices*, will stimulate collaborative research with students, and that our chapter will stimulate student-centered research on class cutting.
- The research results, which will be described in subsequent papers, have the potential to help other schools identify ways they can address cutting more collaboratively, proactively, and effectively.

### **Institutional Support for Public Service and Outreach**

This project is beginning to yield exciting outcomes because of the continuing support and commitment from many people in the cooperating high school and at the university. Because this project combines research, outreach, and service, it requires a long-term commitment from all involved — the researchers, the cooperating school, teachers, and students. This long-term commitment is necessary to develop effective working relationships; produce useful, high quality products; and be alert to service and outreach opportunities that arise. I could not devote a substantial commitment of my time and energy to this project if my university did not value its relationship with the public schools and faculty outreach and service.

There is an active, ongoing, inter-institutional relationship between the university and the high school. While I was able to establish personal contacts, these contacts occurred in the presence of a larger, positive relationship.

UMass Boston and Dorchester High School view their relationship as a partnership. Like any relationship, their partnership continues to

evolve over time. Established inter-institutional programs, such as Urban Scholars, foster the communication and trust that allow other projects to become established and flourish. The implementation and success of new initiatives, in turn, keeps the inter-organizational relationship vital.

Public service and outreach are consistently valued by my university, college, and program, within both their formal and informal cultures. UMass Boston's urban mission is to "dedicate itself especially to understanding and improving the environment and the well-being of citizens of this region" (University of Massachusetts Boston 1998). This urban mission is also central to the College of Public and Community Service (CPCS) which:

...seeks to foster the public good and aid the transformation to a more equitable society; by providing research, advocacy, technical assistance, and service to the surrounding community; and by forging partnerships with public agencies and community organizations that enhance the quality of life for low income and other inadequately served populations (University of Massachusetts Boston website).

These congruent commitments to public service and outreach are supported with funding for public service and outreach in competitive internal grants for faculty. They are also supported in many kinds of informal contacts among colleagues, including brown-bag lunches that provide opportunities to share information about service and outreach and learn from each others' work. Commitment to public service and outreach is also shared by UMass Boston students. Graduate students involved in this work not only provide logistical support, but their attendance at meetings with high school students and their idea-sharing models the process of collaborative qualitative analysis and deepens the quality of our work.

## Conclusion

Our approach — a grassroots focus, collaborative research methods, and persistence over time — has already begun to yield important outcomes. By focusing on class cutting, a social issue affecting many urban high schools and students, this project has identified ways that schools can help adolescents achieve academic success. This project mobilizes student concerns, talents, and knowledge to accomplish outreach and public service and encourages schools to include the student voice in their discussions about ways schools can constructively change. ■

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## About the Author

Susan Opotow (Ph.D., Teacher's College, Columbia University) is an associate professor in the graduate program in dispute resolution at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her theory and research focus on the psychology of injustice and examine the social psychological conditions justifying "moral exclusion," that is, seeing others as outside the scope of justice and eligible for harm. She has published chapters and articles on moral exclusion theory and its applications to environmental conflict, affirmative action, and schooling. She is a member of the editorial boards for *Journal of Social Issues* and *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*. She was issue editor for a *Journal of Social Issues* issue on "Moral Exclusion and Injustice" (1990), an issue on "Green Justice: Conceptions of Fairness and the Natural World" (1994, with Susan Clayton), and a *Social Justice Research* issue on "Affirmative Action and Social Justice" (1992). Opotow was a Harry Frank Guggenheim Research Fellow in 1988-89.