Reviews

Review of *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*. Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth Tryon, Editors, with Amy Hilgendorf. (Temple University Press, 2009).

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Organized into ten chapters and an epilogue, the book focuses on recurrent themes that the research uncovered: organizations’ motivations for taking part in service learning partnerships, issues of timing, fit, management, communication and diversity. Chapters One, Ten, and the Epilogue are written by the editors, while the individual chapters are authored by the graduate students in a research seminar taught by Stoecker. The one exception is Chapter Eight, which is written, unedited, by a nonprofit director. There Amy Mondlach recounts success and failure stories worth hearing, yet her feedback seems aimed at other nonprofits more than university audiences. The final chapter articulates community standards for service learning and is filled with useful concrete suggestions—like sharing syllabi and contracts of understanding—but I’m not sure they address the full scope of the problems that the research uncovers.

In terms of the findings related to motivation readers might be surprised to learn that 42% of organizations admitted to hosting service learners not because it helped their organizational capacity but out of a sense of mission to educate the public, and agencies “considered students...
to be part of that public” (23). Thus nearly half of the groups listed altruism as a motive for hosting students. Further, some organizations expressed concern that if they turned down an offer of service learners, they might be cut off from future university-partnership opportunities. Both reasons are unrelated to receiving worthwhile service. The editors argue that the power dynamic between higher education and resource-strapped community organizations “can set up an unhealthy relationship. . . As institutions try to maximize the learning opportunities for their students, and as organizations try to maximize their capacity to impact their communities, there is as much tendency to withhold information as there is to build strong relationships” (34). In other words, even when asked how they feel about their service partnerships, community organizations may feel competing motivations that prevent them from answering honestly.

Another important finding—again, hardly news to those in the nonprofit world—is that a semester is too short a time to create meaningful partnerships for most organizations. The researchers found that one-semester classes often represent a “poor time investment for the agency” (59). Given that many, if not most, service-learning courses exist within a semester structure, this news should be sobering for academics. If universities are committed to service learning, can it be structured in blocks of one year or longer? Such programs already exist, (see UIC, Trent, and BC for examples) but most service-learning opportunities rely on the idiosyncratic rhythms of the university cycle, not on the needs of the organizations.

The collaborative nature of the project seems to be both the heart of the project and a limitation. That this book can speak on behalf of 64 different organizations provides an important basis of evidence. I like that it grew out of a research seminar in qualitative methods and that students co-authored chapters. I like that the community organizations were involved in giving information, selecting themes for the book and providing feedback for the community standards. In a sense, the book
itself seems to be an example of the sort of community-based research that the editors call for as needed in the field. The editors and writers are self-aware and self-critical about the limitations of the project—it listens to nonprofit organizations and not the constituents served—and are committed to engaging community groups every step of the way.

Yet at the same time, the broad collaborative nature of the book dilutes a clear argumentative voice, making it a bit too careful. Compiling interviews into themes and selecting random anecdotes have the unintended effect of homogenizing the community partners into a bland anonymity. Too seldom do readers specifically learn the statistical results of specific questions or, conversely, hear fully rendered stories of service learning successes or failures. Also, the book seems grounded in a predetermined conclusion that service learning is a good that should be continued, which limits the scope and implications of its critique.

Perhaps the careful tone is needed for this work to be heard in true-believing circles. I was surprised to read in the Epilogue that Tryon and Stoecker have faced negative reactions to their findings: service-learning proponents walking out on conference sessions or leveling anonymous critiques in journals. Some critics have referred to the book’s interviewees as a “disgruntled minority,” expressed offense at a critique of Deweyian education, or responded that community organizations simply must adapt to the evolving needs of higher education (188). Given such criticisms, perhaps the tentativeness of the writing makes some rhetorical sense. Yet if such community-indifferent views are present among academics involved in service learning, I wish that the writers had argued their important ideas more forcefully, or presented a detailed report of the interviews, with a separate argument regarding the implications.

There are moments of real fire and passion in the book—as when the editors claim as their goal “to promote the voices of community
partners [that] have long been marginalized in the service learning frenzy” (18) or when they decry the “willful ignorance” (7) of academics to the community perceptions or effects of service learning. Yet this strong ethical position is tempered by conciliatory language touting the value and necessity of service learning. When claiming, “Randy Stoecker has a twenty-year history as a community-engaged academic and has seen more bad than good service learning,” (8) why then not raise the question of whether service learning is really worth it at all? Nowhere do the writers ever suggest that service-learning-program growth might be reversed or even curtailed. And if their evidence shows a preponderance of problems, shouldn’t new models of community engagement beyond service learning at least be posed as a possibility? If it is a sense of “willful ignorance” (7) that keeps academics from learning about the pitfalls of service learning, what will be necessary to change that dynamic? This collection doesn’t fully engage all these issues, but its presence in the literature of service learning reminds academics that the community should have a voice in when and how to partner with universities.

Works Cited