

Homelessness: A Service Learning Course

A group of homeless people, largely alcohol and drug abusers, had settled into living in and around our lower campus area. The situation upset university people for a variety of reasons: feelings of insecurity as they left buildings after dark; anxiety and guilty consciences about poverty in our rich nation; and not knowing how to respond to panhandling. In response to removing the heating grates and the student protests that followed, the Chancellor formed a "Committee on Lower Campus" to come up with a humane solution to the problem. Part of this solution was to develop a course on homelessness which had a field component to it. Twenty-five undergraduates were placed in agencies that worked with people who are homeless. This article describes the course, which was wonderful for students, exciting for the teacher and agency supervisors, and, we think and hope, helped some homeless individuals.

by
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Here is how it started. Our lower campus at the University of Wisconsin is a comparatively decent place to hang out if you are homeless and alcoholic or on drugs. It does not have a bed, toilet, or roof, but students are more tolerant than most, and there are grates over the heating pipes which offer some warmth against the Wisconsin winters. Understandably, some students, staff, and faculty felt uncomfortable leaving the buildings late at night. It is not clear if the homeless people were asking for money or harassing people, or if it was mostly a matter of having one's conscience pricked, but the situation was bothering people.

Upset citizens of the University complained, and the complaints got to the Chancellor's office. A decision was made to remove the grates, and then, predictably, some students protested by sitting in the Chancellor's office. Here comes the unpredictable part: The Chancellor's response to the students was: "You are right. There has

to be a better way." Bless our Chancellor.

Out of this was born "The Committee on Lower Campus," appointed by Chancellor David Ward in May of 1995.

"The committee, comprised of faculty, staff, students, and joined by individuals representing the community at large, will address issues of safety and related concerns involving the lower campus. The panel will offer recommendations containing ways to:

- improve the safety of students, visitors and employees on the lower campus;
- inform and involve members of the university community in ways to deal effectively with lower campus safety challenges and concerns;
- increase university community awareness of the complex issue of homelessness;

- suggest ways in which students, staff and faculty can join existing community efforts addressing homelessness; and
- mobilize campus and city personnel and resources to jointly assess and address the need for alternative temporary shelter."

This committee met regularly, and while I did not join it until after it had been meeting for several months, I was enormously impressed with the sincere goodwill of all people concerned. Another thing caught my attention: The Chancellor's Office was represented by a dean, various professors and "higher ups" were there, and people who worked in the trenches with homeless individuals were represented, the latter being an outreach worker and a policeman. It was noteworthy that the committee wanted to hear, foremost, from the people in the trenches. I never heard a disrespectful word from anyone in the meetings. Quite the contrary, compassion and thoughtful problem-solving were the dominant themes.

Police officers from on- and off-campus began meeting with a group of agency directors to share information and strategies for addressing the needs of unconnected homeless people. The Committee unanimously recommended funding for a "Lower Campus Case Management Position" to provide for greater safety for all concerned. The committee also reached consensus on the need for police to exercise a policy of tolerance to-

wards homeless people, i.e., to discontinue the practice of ticketing the homeless for trespassing and/or drinking alcohol as long as they kept peaceably to themselves.

Several members of the committee talked about the need for strategies that focused on long-term solutions. One of those strategies was to involve students, staff, and faculty in community efforts. To "...invite faculty to revisit the curriculum in various schools and departments...to include service learning and community outreach, as well as...intervention approaches" (Barrows, 1995).

Service learning has long been a dream of mine. If the powers that be would just let me run the world, or at least the educational system, I would institute mandatory service training and work for all students from the 6th grade through the Ph.D. But back to earth: the Chancellor's Office said it would fund a service course taught on homelessness. In so doing, it was hoped that students would join the University administration in trying to alleviate the problems on lower campus, rather than just demonstrate in the Chancellor's office. Right from the beginning, the service learning component was envisioned as students working with and for social service agencies, in hopes of finding homes and treatment for people who were

homeless and possibly AODA.

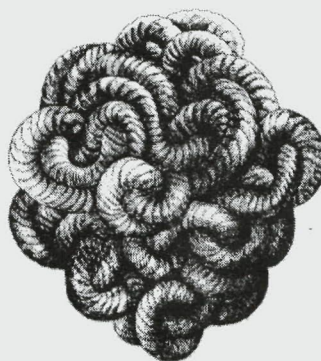
For the past seventeen years I had run a service ("field") course on severe mental illnesses in our community. Because approximately 1/3 of homeless people also have severe mental illnesses, I was already well connected with the shelters for homeless people, as well as the treatment centers for AODA, so I asked for the job of teaching this course. My department said "go for it," and even gave me a semester's reduction of one course so I had time to bone up on homelessness and develop good student placements in the community. The course was up and running in September 1996.

Altruism

Does true altruism exist? If conversation is lagging among academics and students, try asking that one! You will not get definitive answers, but it will liven up the discussion. I do not have an answer, but I be-

lieve it is healthy for people to do good for others. Most students are eager to help out in this troubled world, but simply do not have the time to do so. If the opportunity is provided by giving class credit for hours spent in the

field, two important things are accomplished: 1) Students will have the time to do the work, since it becomes part of their



school curriculum; 2) Professors can assign academic work along with the experiential to better ensure that students know what they are doing, and do it well.

Call it altruism, call it selfishness in making oneself feel good, call it whatever you want, but when an elective course on homelessness was offered September 1996 it filled up faster than courses in human sexuality that I have taught.

In addition to the above, enthusiasm and offers of help came from both within campus and the wider community. People from the Morgridge Center for Public Service, which promotes, organizes, and supports a variety of public and community service opportunities for U.W. students, faculty, staff and alumni called and offered to help find student placements. The policemen on campus offered a lecture on "safety issues" for the class. The president of the Wisconsin chapter of N.A.S.W. called and met with me to offer his interest and expertise. Professors from other departments (English, Nutrition, Business, etc.) called and expressed interest in developing similar classes. The head of the Bureau of Community Mental Health called and offered a guest lecture on policy issues. All of the agencies we tapped to place our students for practice experience replied with enthusiasm and the promise of on-sight supervision. Twenty agencies that work with homeless individuals were called upon to accept student placements. The outpouring of interest and help was wonderful.

Homelessness: A Service Learning Course

In planning the course on homelessness the focus was on three different groups: 1) social work students; 2) community agencies that dealt with homelessness and alcohol and drug addictions; and 3) people who are homeless. How could the course be developed to meet educational goals, some community/agency needs, and be helpful to homeless people?

Right from the earliest planning stages, students and agencies were eager to participate. Students are almost al-



ways eager to get off the school bench and into "hands-on" work. Agencies are overworked, underfunded, and understaffed. Taking students involved freeing up some staff to supervise, as well as providing an orientation to their agency, but they were all more than willing to provide this to get the extra help that students provide. In most cases, the passions and idealisms of students more than compensate for lack of experience.

One of my most delightful moments of teaching in over three decades, came from a 21-year-old senior: "I'm working with this woman who has severe

schizophrenia and she's homeless, and she's an alcoholic, and there are only seven weeks left in the semester. How do I cure her?" I did not talk about "realistic goals," etc. We just chose a good starting point, a shelter that accepted her condition. At the end of seven weeks the woman had a roof over her head, and did say, "Thank you for caring," when the student accompanied her to her first AA meeting. That "thank you" solidified the student's desire to become a social worker. The student also learned a great deal about the ravages of schizophrenia and the horrors of alcoholism and also something about the complexities of our social service system. The agency was happy to have a very difficult case off their hands for a bit. My guess is that in this particular case, the student's starry-eyed idealism went a long way towards starting the homeless woman in a helpful direction. We will know more next semester when a new student takes over.

But I digress! The course is presently designed to accept 25 undergraduate social welfare majors. It meets for one and a half hours a week on campus for classroom learning, and each student also does five hours a week in the field working in various agencies. It is assumed that an additional two to four hours a week are spent on readings and assignments.

The course has a dual focus: 1) The larger political, economic, racial, and social causes of homelessness; and 2) the specifics of homelessness in our city

and on the lower campus. The theory and research of what is currently known about effective interventions with homelessness is studied, as well as the major gaps in our knowledge and policies of non-help. The heterogeneity of people who are homeless is looked at: men and women, children, teens, young adults, elderly, veterans, different racial groups, rural and urban, dual diagnosis with AODA, serious mental illnesses or developmental disabilities, and criminal behavior.

An attempt is made to translate the above knowledge into practice skills for helping individuals who are homeless and into advocating for policies that will address some of the inequities in our country that cause homelessness. To quote my colleague, Dr. Mary Ann Test: "To acquire the skills and muster the courage to do things differently...." (1996).

The most important elements of this course seem to be the following:

1. Excellent field placements and agency supervision. The "hand-on" experience of the students, and the willingness of people who are homeless to be our teachers.
2. A marvelous teaching assistant, Kristi Carr, who spent a large part of her time circulating from placement to placement, observing and talking with students and supervisors. This time in the field accomplished two main goals: 1) keeping an

active, strong tie between the University and the community; 2) seeing first hand how the students were doing; answering their questions; picking up little troubles before they became big.

3. A format that includes weekly student presentations about their field work. They can use their time to either teach us something they have learned in the field, or to use the group for problem-solving around field issues.
4. A series of written assignments in which students are asked to link theory (presented in class and by the assigned readings) to practice.

Student Reactions

"I have learned about the multiplicity of factors forcing an individual to be without housing... Just hearing their stories has opened my myopic eyes."

"I am finding that the people I work with have a lot of courage. What I have learned from each individual would take volumes to express."

"I used to stereotype a lot of homeless as being mean alcoholics. This view has drastically changed... Many suffer with mental illness, and it's so awful to see."

"So much I have learned... it has made policies more important and statistics more personal. This class is the best I have

taken in all of college."

"I got to thinking about what it must be like to be a child living in a shelter..." "I was so naive, so sheltered from 'real problems'...."

"Instead of words on paper or faceless old men I ignore on the streets, I see

real people. I have gained respect for a group of extremely unfortunate people, and have lost the ability to ignore...." (All seniors).

"On State Street and where U.W. Madison meets the community, you don't have to look far to see them huddling in doorways, sitting on benches and napping in bus shelters. For the most part, people avoid making conversation or eye contact with them. Rarely, if ever, does a smile or other form of outward recognition or kindness come their way. To many these are the invisible people—faceless, nameless and homeless. But to Kathy Shawkey and Sarah Walsh, the 'invisible' now have names, faces, voices and feelings" (Arnold, 1996).

On the first day of class students were asked their motivation for enrolling. Almost all expressed anger and indignation that in the city that *Money Magazine* voted "#1 place to live in the U.S."—the richest country in the world—people are living in the streets in disgraceful conditions. Beyond a doubt, it was a biased group of students to begin with. Even so, it has been heartening to have the entire class indicate a powerful ex-



perience as they moved from theory to practice and had the opportunity to try to help a few people leading such hard, joyless lives.

Were there a few problems too? Of course. Not all the placements were equally as good; some of the student presentations rambled on, and so did some of my lectures; and for some students it took time to understand that an alcoholic, mentally ill woman who had been living on the streets for two years was not going to be "cured" or even helped in three months.

But on the whole, this course seemed to be very good for all of the students on several different levels. Exams and papers reflected significant academic learning. Facts, theories, and statistics hold in the memory better when they are associated with real people in the real world. Clinical skills were practiced, refined, tossed out, and revamped. The complexities of human stories did not fit neatly into theories. It began to sink in that maybe it was not a matter of "resistant clients" but more a matter of we do not know how to help, or there are not enough resources to help, or the resources are not adequate. "Blaming the victim" was no longer an abstraction, but rather something students could see happening to poor, homeless people.

Perhaps the biggest good of all was what this work did for the students. Simply put, it

made them better people. Most people in academia, students and professors alike, come from middle-class backgrounds. We tend to see people who are homeless in terms of deficits ("multiproblem" folks). Students in this course wrote and talked about strengths and coping strategies of many homeless people. "How do they survive?" "I don't believe I would have the strength...."

Based upon what students wrote in their journals and papers, what I observed in classroom, and what supervisors in the field wrote about their work, I would say that students matured, became much "softer," less judgmental of others, and above all got fired up to do something about our national disgrace of homelessness.

People Who Are Homeless

We assume the course was good for students. Did we help any of the people who are homeless? It is too early to tell. Maybe the ball started to roll in the direction of sobriety for a few people. Places to live were found for some. The work load was lightened a little bit in some of the agencies. There will be a few more professionals who are committed to helping

homeless people, and they will have had some experience in the area. Maybe in the future when these professionals are working 40-50 hours a week in the field, they will help more

homeless individuals or get some badly needed policy changes to take place.

If one counts the "existential moments" of life as important, then I am sure the students were able to improve at least a few hours in a few peoples' lives. Sometimes that is all one can do. The whole experience of teaching this course brings to mind an old tale heard years ago of the small boy and the starfish. As I recall it: A low tide stranded millions of star fish on the shore, and they were dying. A small boy was frantically throwing star fish back into the sea. "What are you doing?" said his Grandfather. "There are millions and millions of these fish, and you cannot do anything about this." "I bet the few fish I tossed back into the ocean don't feel that way," replied the boy.

Teacher Reactions

Teaching a service learning course provides the opportunity for total involvement in the subject matter and the student's learning process. The intellectual grappling with ideas, theories, research and the literature are there, as in any course. In this kind of course you also see some of the emotional and maturational development of students. In addition, the teacher and students get to have dynamic interactions with community agencies and with people of all kinds. This kind of teaching gets one out of the Ivory Tower and into the outside world.

A striking example of



this comes to mind. In my syllabus and in my opening lecture, I make an effort to break down stereotypes about people who are homeless. I emphasize that many such people have had bad luck from birth on up, that they are more like us (than different) in their needs and wishes....and so on. Most of our undergraduates are from the "Lake Wobegons" of the Midwest and are quite shocked by their first encounters with homelessness, alcoholism, and serious mental illnesses.

Even though I believe the above, I am also aware that an occasional con artist does exist and that there may be dangers out in the field. So the second class period is taken up by a guest lecture from our campus policeman to talk about safety issues. This policeman is very well trained in the specific area of homelessness, and he is a humane and kind gentleman. But his lecture is full of admonitions (as is my syllabus) about: "Don't loan money, ride in a car, give out your telephone number or address, get into a closed room with an agitated hallucinating person; keep a physical distance of at least 2-3 feet..., etc." We surely do not give out such a list of warnings before attending one of our own social gatherings. So which is it: are we alike or different? A double-bind message if ever there was one.

The literature cites many explanations and theories about

poverty, and it may be mostly right. The reality of the streets adds other complexities, and it is also correct. All of this is self-evident, of course, and academia does not emphasize simplicity, but getting into the streets adds other dimensions. It also adds lots of conflict to teaching and learning. Both teacher and student have to learn to live with many ambiguities.

As a professor I had become used to professing over the years! (Profess: 1. To affirm; 2. To make a pretense; 3. To have or claim skill in or knowledge of; and 4. To affirm belief in; according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd edition.) I usually start a class by asking: "Any questions?" Response: "Will... be on the exam?" In the service learning course, when I said, "Any questions?," the response was a one

hour class take-over, and it was not idle chit-chat either. This called for an immediate re-vamping of plans, and from that point on the format was 45 minutes of student presentation and discussion to teach or problem-solve, and 45 minutes of teacher lecture. Grading the student presentations helped keep them high quality. Timing them kept us to a reasonable schedule. Beyond a doubt, the student presentations of field experiences were the crux of the course.

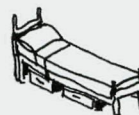
A striking feature of service learning is how well the

theories and facts stay with students after they have had field experience. One of my colleagues, a genetics professor, actually gave the same genetics test to two similar classes of undergraduates, one class that studied only from the books, and the other only from the field. The students from the field class did significantly better on the test. I would expect the same from students in the homelessness course, and will test that for myself in the future.

Another striking feature that moves me deeply is what the students learn directly from their clients. Book learning and lectures do not bring tears to the eyes; clients do. Aside from the policeman's lecture, students were soon talking about their clients' bravery, courage, abilities to cope with the untenable, and their humanity in the face of inhumane circumstances. It is one thing to read about auditory and visual hallucinations and crossed wires and transmitters in the brain. It is quite another to have a

young homeless man with schizophrenia tell a student his own age about his past hopes and dreams. Then the next day the student sees the man screaming in terror,

as voices rage their savage messages. The auditory hallucinations became much more than neurotransmitter gone awry. "There but for the grace of God go I," is a theme often expressed in class.



Summary

Service learning is BIG — it is comprehensive. It brings the community and the university together, keeping the Ivory Tower more reality based and the agency perhaps more up to date on theory and research. There are many public organizations and agencies desperate for the extra help students can provide. There are many people leading lives of desperation who need and deserve all the help they can get. As fellow human beings, we owe any help we can give. It is

good for all concerned.

Learning takes on a richness that affects the mind and the spirit and probably one's moral development, too. Service learning challenges the students — they really love it. It does good works in the community, and we think it helps people in need. This course did help clear up the problem on lower campus, as housing was found for most of the people who had been hanging out there. It may even change the teacher's life. It certainly did mine. □

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