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Neivin M. Shalabi

*Delta University for Science and Technology*

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## In Their Own Perspectives: Not-For-Profit Staff Perspectives of Collaborations Between the Community and the Academy

**Reviewed by Neivin M. Shalabi**

Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth A. Tryon, editors, *The Unheard voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009, 232 pages, ISBN: 978-1-59213-995-8

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The central goal of Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth Tryon's *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* is to amplify the voices of community partners, thus addressing the neglect of community impact and perception of service-learning. The book chapters are based on qualitative data collected from 67 not-for-profit professionals by students in a community-based research seminar at the University of Wisconsin. In addition to a preface and an epilogue, *Unheard Voices* is organized into 10 chapters.

The first chapter briefly reviews pertinent literature, highlighting bias toward student outcomes; the paucity of research on the community side of service-learning; and limitations of previous studies on community perspectives mainly as lacking sufficient depth. The second chapter begins by discussing the meager resources of the majority of not-for-profits, but moves quickly beyond that to argue that the motives of not-for-profit professionals are complex and go beyond their desires to serve the needs of

their organizations and those of their clients to benefit society at large. The authors classify the motivations of community organizations for hosting service-learners into four categories: an altruistic motive to educate service-learners, a long-term motive for the sector and the organization, the capacity-building motive, and the higher education relationship motive.

The next chapters—three to eight—highlight several issues associated with service-learning for partnering organizations. Among these issues is the challenge of finding a good match between the organization and students; the authors revealed how the location of not-for-profits—away from campus or in rural areas—may constrain their recruitment of service-learners. The issue of short-term service-learning also emerged as a daunting challenge facing community-based organizations that accept service-learners. For example, the authors explained how the short duration of service neither justifies the time organizations invest in preparing students nor yields adequate benefits for

students and organizations. The authors proposed ideas for getting the most out of short-term service-learning and moving it into longer and sustained collaborations with universities.

Evaluating service-learners surfaced as another important issue facing community-based organizations. The authors discussed agency professionals' concerns about the extent to which, if at all, their input affected students' grades and the differences between their goals of evaluating service-learners and those of the academy, noting that while the university focuses on assessing student learning, community professionals are concerned with assessing student performance based on the set of skills and competencies service-learners bring to their organizations.

In addition to discussing the issues of good fit and evaluation, the authors pinpointed the concept of diversity as it relates to service-learning, highlighting the demographic differences between service-learners and the clients in that the first usually come from privileged racial and class backgrounds while the latter typically come from historically disadvantaged groups. The authors stressed the value of diversity as essential to building a cohesive and empowered community. Significantly, the authors discussed diversity beyond demographics, stressing the importance of enhancing students' cultural competencies through diversity trainings and increasing their exposure to diverse groups. Importantly, they called for intentional efforts to enhance diversity and appreciation for it, noting that overlooking the issue of diversity in service-learning could yield negative impacts for students and communities.

The last two chapters—nine and ten—describe principles of success for service-learning as perceived by not-for-profit professionals. Commitment, communication, and compatibility emerged as the most central principles of success. Commitment refers to the idea of sustaining service-learning relationships between the community and the academy over time. Communication signifies the critical importance of maintaining effective interactions among partnering organizations, students, and faculty members. Compatibility indicates the idea of good fit, meaning that care should be given to ensure that service-learning projects fit the needs of the community and that students' placements match the organizations' goals and needs.

While *Unheard Voices* covers a relatively broad range of issues associated with service-learning from a community perspective, it suffers from a

number of limitations. For example, it provides little to no information about participants' demographics, the characteristics of their not-for-profits, and the exact number of participants who contributed to each topic. The use of visualization, such as summary tables and/or diagrams, with this information would have increased the validity of findings and allowed for an examination of how participants' backgrounds and their organizations' types might have shaped their perceptions of service-learning. Likewise, providing more details about data analysis procedures such as coding types and strategies for identifying themes and their rationale would have enhanced the validity of findings. Lastly, incorporating a theoretical framework and a discussion of how researchers' identities impacted their interpretation of data would have increased the trustworthiness of the information presented in this volume.

Despite the above noted limitations, *Unheard Voices* is a needed addition to the literature for several reasons. First, it highlights community voice, thus addressing an important gap in service-learning literature. Significantly, it presents a persuasive argument for the importance of caring about the community impact and perception of service-learning through both soliciting community voice and discussing the consequences of overlooking the community side of service-learning. On a related note, the book goes beyond revealing issues facing not-for-profit professionals in their service-learning collaborations with higher education to discussing the significance of each issue and presenting suggestions for handling those issues. Doing so increases the utility and practicality of the book, thus making it appealing to both scholars and practitioners. Second, supporting the discussions with many direct quotes from the participants is a major strength of this volume; the voices of community professionals make the book authentic and interesting. Third, the organization of the book is another merit; the use of headings and sub-headings guides the reader and makes the book reader-friendly. Significantly, by engaging different constituents in authoring this book, Stoecker and Tryon managed to model collaboration among community professionals, students, and faculty members in service-learning.

*Unheard Voices* contributes to the knowledge base on service-learning in higher education in several ways. First, it is among the pioneering works that focus on community voice and impact of service-learning (e.g., Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007). However, this volume is distinct

in that it addresses a wider range of issues facing community-based organizations in service-learning and allows ample space for the voice of not-for-profit professionals. The uniqueness of this book also stems from its strong message that higher education constituents should engage with community partners in a dialectic process to enhance the practice of service-learning and ensure its value to communities, raising a flag that if universities overlook the community side of service-learning, not-for-profits might refuse to accept students in their organizations, which may threaten the practice of service-learning. Second, *Unheard Voices* confirms many findings in existing literature. For example, it consolidates previous findings on the critical role of faculty in enhancing service-learning (e.g., Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999; Checkoway, 2001), especially in ensuring the right match between students and organizations, establishing effective communication between them, and in clarifying expectations for student roles at partnering organizations. It also affirms previous findings (Bringle et al., 1999; Vogelgesang, 2004) as well as theoretical arguments (Bacon, 2002; Holland, 2002) about the cultural differences between the academy and the community, which suggests that attention should be paid to establishing relationships and communication between both entities. Similar to previous works (e.g., Driscoll, 2007; Scheibel, Bowley, & Jones, 2005), this book underscores the importance of evaluating service-learning courses to assess gains for all partners involved and improve the practice.

In addition to increasing the knowledge base on the community side of service-learning, *Unheard Voices* pushes the envelop by calling attention to new lines of inquiry, for example that the four suggested motives of agency staff members for participating in service-learning with higher education require empirical validation. Researchers could use the ideas presented in the book to develop scales reflecting each motive. Also, future studies may examine how these motives vary across service-learning partnerships and the factors affecting this variation, such as institutional type or service orientation. Data from such studies would be useful in designing satisfactory service-learning courses for community partners.

One of the key messages in *Unheard Voices* is the importance of evaluating service-learning to ensure its value for all involved partners. While there exist some scales for assessing student impact of service-learning (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004), there are hardly any published scales designed specifically

to assess community partners' perspectives. Given the paucity of research in this area, developing such scales would be a significant contribution to the field. For example, the development of such scales could reduce existing bias in the literature toward student outcomes of service-learning, eliminate barriers to understanding community impact and perspective, and promote our understanding of the community side of service-learning.

Prior to the 2000s, the literature focused on the academy side of service-learning, especially the impacts of this innovation on students. After the pioneering work of Cruz and Giles (2000), several other works also addressed community perspectives, mostly by soliciting feedback from professionals at partnering organizations. *Unheard Voices*, however, calls attention to the importance of seeking the perspectives of the clientele of the organizations themselves. Following this direction would yield a more complete picture of the community side of service-learning.

*Unheard Voices* calls for designing mutually beneficial service-learning partnerships for the academy and the community. Future research could investigate practical ways to do so. The outcomes of such studies could help bridge the huge gaps in power between both entities and promote reciprocal relationships between them as each entity recognizes its contributions to, and benefits from, these collaborations. Also, the volume discusses in detail the characteristics that organizations aspire to have in student service-learning. This area prompts a direction for a new line of research that examines the criteria universities use in choosing partnering organizations. Such data could help organizations better prepare themselves for service-learning collaborations with universities. The book highlights the issue of short-term service-learning as a major challenge facing not-for-profits in their service-learning collaborations with universities. The authors presented a few suggestions as to how to move it into longer sustained collaborations. However, given the importance of the issue, more studies are needed to investigate creative ways to sustain service-learning partnerships with communities over time. Outcomes of such studies could guide the long-term design and implementation of effective service-learning collaborations between higher education and communities. *Unheard Voices* is a significant contribution to service-learning literature that provides profound insights—from the community side—into building effective and democratic service-learning collaborations

between the community and the academy.

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## About the Reviewer

Neivin N. Shalabi is a lecturer at Delta University for Science and Technology in El Mansoura, Egypt.