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Cover Page Footnote

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Social Change in Rural Communities: A Pilot Study of Liberating Service-Learning with Rural Higher Education

Garret J. Zastoupil

Abstract

This exploratory study examines how service-learning faculty and community partners affiliated with rural colleges and universities engage in a practice aligned with Stoecker's (2016) proposed liberating service-learning framework. Findings from 10 in-depth interviews indicate the ongoing emphasis on student learning, increased interface with government leaders, local businesses, and advocacy organizations, and distinct contextual factors faced by service-learning partners in rural areas. These findings complicate Stoecker's initial framework, which completely decenters student learning, and calls for a deeper understanding of who constitutes community, change, and power broadly and in the context of densely connected rural areas. It also places the liberating service-learning framework within a theory of community development and outside of its ongoing emphasis as an experimental education model.

The ability of higher education to improve local communities' material conditions and to facilitate community empowerment through outreach and service remains highly debated among scholars and the public (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Service-learning is a specific form of public engagement that seeks to improve social welfare by connecting academic courses with community groups and organizations to fulfill a mutually agreed-upon goal. But it is arguably one of the least effective approaches in achieving these aims (Stoecker et al., 2009). Moreover, current literature documenting the impact of service-learning neglects civic engagement in rural communities despite their compounding structural challenges such as environmental degradation, lack of social infrastructure, and pressing social and economic challenges (Stoecker et al., 2016). This study examines the experiences of service-learning faculty and community partners at rural four-year colleges and universities across the Upper Midwest using the Liberating Service-Learning (LSL) Framework developed by Randy Stoecker (2016). Findings demonstrates the shortcomings of LSL within rural communities' political and economic dynamics and the need to reconsider how LSL and participatory development must be reconsidered to support rural grassroots social change.

Service-Learning: Emergence, Critique, and Community Practice

Early scholarship and theorizing around service-learning framed it as an innovative

pedagogical strategy in which students linked course content with real world experiences (Jacoby, 1999). Research over the last 30 years pursued evidence of student benefits incurred through service-learning experiences and tried to understand best practices for faculty and administrators to support service-learning on their campuses (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Holland, 1997; Jacoby, 1999). Yet despite this important work, the practice's limitations were emerging from the research: Cruz and Giles (2000) pointed to a dearth of data documenting community change in service-learning research; Green (2003) named how service-learning prioritizes white students and cultural beliefs; and Stoecker and his colleagues (2009) identified how service-learning centers the academic calendar and silences community voices.

Out of these critiques emerged a new iteration that centered equitable practices in the classroom and community (Butin, 2007; Mitchell, 2008). Mitchell (2008) proposed a critical service-learning that focused on relationships, redistributing power, and social change while supporting student praxis. Her later collaborative work documented how whiteness remains centered in service-learning across both the classroom and community and must be addressed by service-learning instructors (Mitchell et al., 2012). Yet scholars maintain that service-learning was, at its core, a tool for student learning that could also benefit, with no precise definition, "communities." It has no specific vision for change, and, most importantly, no particular methods through which service-learning can

achieve these aims. Stoecker (2016) introduced LSL, which reprioritized the four elements of service-learning and argued for a shift from student learning to constituency-led change.

Four Elements of LSL

Change

LSL first argues that service-learning must prioritize change—specifically, grassroots-organized contestations against those in power. Change in this context is grounded in Freirean participatory research and Alinsky-style organizing. When organizing, service-learning partnerships should animate the “sociological imagination” (Mills, 2000, p. 7) or the “critical reflection” (Freire, 2000, p. 66) of community residents as they connect individual problems to larger social structures and systemic inequities. Service-learning’s role in “change” is the deployment of “knowledge power” (Foucault, 1980, pp. 51-52) by using research to support community organizing and radical participatory development practice (Kenny, 2011). Academics adopt organizing principles (Stoecker, 1999) and collaborate with community leaders on projects that produce information for organizations to challenge and gain power.

Community

Second, LSL must work “toward” community, defined as a “face-to-face collectivity characterized by a multiplicity of interconnecting and overlapping roles that mutually enhance the sustainability of the collectivity and of all its constituents” (Stoecker, 2016, p. 114). LSL prioritizes collaboration on constituency-identified needs that builds social connection as they “develop the capacity to take on further problems and that embodies the will and the power of that constituency” (Fisher & DeFilippis 2015, p. 364). This varies from previous models in which service-learning partnerships occur with formal nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and, in some instances, for-profit corporations.

Service

Third, “service” in LSL becomes grounded in covenantal ethics principles (Hilsen, 2006), in which university and constituency relationships are no longer delineated between “us” the academics and “them” the community, but rather “us”

together. Thus, in this relationship service works with constituency groups on specific issues, with students working on specific elements to support organizing campaigns.

Learning

The last component of LSL shifts learning away from students and toward collective student and constituent learning. This type of learning is grounded in popular education for all parties through shared praxis (Freire, 2000). This pillar reflects Zuber-Skerritt and Teare’s (2013) Lifelong Action Learning model for community development. This model focuses on learning throughout the project rather than by the summative outcomes that have dominated student learning scholarship over the past thirty years (Furco & Billig, 2002).

Liberating Service-Learning as Rural Community Development

Fellow scholar-practitioners have noted many gaps in Stoecker’s framework. Jacoby (2017) identified the need for more precise classroom structures that facilitate LSL’s goals. Mitchell (2017) charged that LSL completely decenters student learning, which is the core purpose of higher education. Last, Hickmon et al. (2018) argued that LSL disregards the service-learning movement’s important contributions and deprioritizes student development. Evident in these critiques is the tension within LSL as it moves service-learning toward community organizing and participatory development and away from “experiential education” (Clayton et al., 2014). For the purpose of this inquiry, I contend that LSL aligns most closely with participatory community development (PCD), understood as the process in which local people organize to take control of local issues as a means of creating social change toward an equitable society (Woodhouse, 2009). PCD emerged out of the Global South and emphasizes local-resident-led planning and decision-making in community transformation (Prokopy & Castelloe, 1999). Both LSL and PCD emphasize mutually prioritizing grassroots-led change, long-term relationality, and learning through popular education (Freire, 2000). As PCD is an expansive field that is expanding across the globe, it is thus relevant to this study. I examine

¹ I follow Stoecker’s understanding of “constituency” as “groups of people who share such similar circumstances that, if they organized, they could fight back against the forces of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion that block their individual and collective self-sustainability” (Stoecker, 2016 p. 118).

PCD within the context of rural community development in the United States.

Rural Community Development

LSL is relevant to rural PCD for three main reasons. First, there is a dearth of professionalized nonprofits in rural areas; instead, rural communities leverage loosely organized civil society organizations and local government to create community change (Richardson & London, 2007). Thus, constituents working to create change have fewer intermediary barriers to coordinate and collaborate on their efforts (Cavaye, 2001; Snavely & Tracy, 2002). This is supported by the dominant model of rural development, which emphasizes collaboration to build on community assets (e.g., financial, natural resource, and cultural) (Flora et al., 2016). Many rural communities' unique strength is dense social networks, which are key for successful change (Flora et al., 2016). Given relational networks' characteristics and more direct access to local elites, the opportunity for collective grassroots social change in a participatory manner is ripe within this context (Ratner, 2020).

Second, local institutions, such as universities, are focal sites for community life and development (Elliott, 2018; Real et al., 2014). Education scholars have long recognized that schools tend to be the most important anchor institutions in rural areas, as they provide both physical spaces for the community and opportunities for community events (e.g., high school sports, theatrical productions) and non-school-related activities like voting (Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Moreover, educational institutions play an integral role in the economic development of geographic areas, as deregulation, deindustrialization, and globalization have altered traditional economies and their respective natural resource, agricultural, and manufacturing-based jobs (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that rural regional comprehensive universities operate as anchor institutions and house a number of important community capitals that can be leveraged for community development purposes (Orphan & McClure, 2019). Thus, rural colleges and universities can serve as key institutions to support and strengthen the well-being of the communities and regions they inhabit.

Third, rural community development has been placed into two dominant paradigms: technical assistance and participatory grassroots-approaches. As noted earlier, the lack of nonprofit and direct-

service infrastructure has made a technical approach to development more challenging in rural spaces as the nonprofit organizations that frequently request and pay for expert support are not as present in rural spaces (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011). Moreover, the technical assistance approach has historically been colonizing to local communities, with the communities viewing it as a tool of domination. (Doel & Penn, 2007).

Therefore, strong community practice in rural areas merges the strengths of community organizing, popular education, and participatory development to create a community-centered process. In this process, local residents create a shared vision, define goals, create, and implement an action plan by building on grassroots capacity and local assets (Carlton-Laney et al., 2013; Flora et al., 2016; Ratner, 2020). The best asset-based development occurs when grassroots organizations increase their organizational development to expand legitimacy and impact (Opore, 2007). LSL is therefore positioned to respond to this need for grassroots participation, to solve the pressing challenges facing rural communities, and to leverage higher education institutions as a community resource.

Rural Service-Learning

Despite the proliferation of service-learning scholarship, the field continues to prioritize urban and global service-learning (Stoecker et al., 2016). This phenomenon, known as urbanism, the privileging of urban experiences and disregarding rural communities and people, is well established within the field of rural sociology and is clearly present within the service-learning literature (Thomas et al., 2013). Yet rural colleges and universities play an important role in community residents' lives (Miller & Tuttle, 2007) and can be important institutions in creating community-wide change (Rubin, 2001). While, rhetorically, service-learning has promised to provide important student and community outcomes, the nature of rural communities means service-learning partnerships can have greater impact.

This study seeks to understand how rural service-learning practitioners and community partners experience and exhibit each LSL model facet. It specifically seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do rural service-learning faculty and community partners exhibit LSL pillars in their practice?

- What do faculty and partners identify as actualized or aspired-to impacts in their service-learning partnerships and projects?
- How do faculty and partners describe the learning that occurs through their partnership, if at all?
- How do faculty and partners explain building partnerships and individual projects for service-learning students that fulfill organizational needs, if at all?
- How do faculty and partners speak to service-learning projects as supporting “community,” if at all?

Methodology

Framework and instrument

To answer these questions, this study used semi-structured in-depth interviewing with faculty members and community partners affiliated with service-learning projects at rural higher education institutions in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Researchers developed a protocol that consisted of 10 open-ended questions using an adapted version of the Interview Refinement Protocol Framework (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). A protocol matrix was used to develop inquiry-driven conversation with participants informed by the LSL framework. The same questions were asked to all participants regardless of their status as either faculty or community partners.

Questions explored participants’ motivations to enter service-learning partnerships, their perceived outcomes and impacts of partnerships, and the context and local community response. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into NVivo 12. A multi-phase coding scheme was used following the process laid forth by Creswell (2016). First, the researcher read each transcript and engaged in an open coding process, memoing after the initial read (Groenewald, 2008). Transcripts were then coded using a mixed coding scheme with predetermined codes derived from the LSL framework or new codes for comments that failed to fit into the established codes derived from the open coding process. Ongoing memoing occurred through the coding process. The codes were then organized into relevant themes and discussed with two study supervisors to generate findings.

Recruitment

Ten individuals participated in this study: four community partners and six faculty members. Upon receiving institutional review board exemption for the study, the researcher began recruiting participants using a snowball sampling methodology. First, the researcher identified nine four-year colleges and universities that were located in counties not defined as “metropolitan” according to the 2010 United States Census Data in alignment with previously established definitions of “rural” (Flora et al., 2016). Using institutional websites, the researcher identified community outreach professionals and contacted them via email. Several institutions did not have an identifiable community engagement coordinator or service-learning office, and several of the staff members did not have 12-month contracts, creating significant barriers in recruitment. The researcher asked community engagement professionals to share contact information of any faculty members or community partners who had been engaged in service-learning projects over the past year. Several coordinators simply forwarded the message to faculty, while others provided a curated list to follow up. Participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

Findings

This study made three primary findings based on the interview coding, field notes, and memos. The themes were grouped into the following categories: (a) Ongoing focus on student learning; (b) Hopes and challenges of rural service-learning; (c) Rural and institutional context. Each finding is described in more depth below.

Finding (a): Ongoing focus on student learning

Learning. While the LSL framework shifted the focus toward collective learning through popular education, the role of student learning was a strong theme throughout the data. Every interview participant described the benefits students gained through their service-learning experiences. All of the faculty identified student learning as the primary motivation for pursuing service-learning and identified service-learning as a pedagogical tool to enhance student learning. Within this finding, though, there were several variants in understanding how service-learning

² For this study, I define “service-learning office” as a campus unit responsible for coordinating for-credit service-learning experiences. Depending upon the institution, sometimes this office also included non-credit-bearing service experiences.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Type of Partner	Organization Type	Issue Focus
Community Partner	Community Organization	Sexual Violence
Community Partner	Local Government	Environment
Community Partner	Local Government	Environment, Transportation
Community Partner	Regional Economic Development	Housing
Faculty Member	Private Liberal Arts College	Communications
Faculty Member	Public Liberal Arts College	Political Science
Faculty Member	Public Regional Comprehensive University	Political Science
Faculty Member	Public Regional Comprehensive University	Animal Science
Faculty Member	Public Regional Comprehensive University	Education
Faculty Member	Public Regional Comprehensive University	Criminal Justice

facilitated student development. Two faculty members spoke to the broader democratic goals of service-learning and university civic engagement (Saltmarsh, 2005). One faculty member mentioned a recent assessment conducted by their academic department on service-learning outcomes, and found that:

students [want] to feel more connected to community, more able to make change in their community, but also more responsibility to make change in the community, which is something that we aim for it, not just that you can, but this is part of your job and in a democracy is to do this kind of work. (Private Liberal Arts Faculty)

Other service-learning faculty focused on service-learning's experiential component, which helps students apply classroom learning in the "real world." For example, one criminal justice faculty member working on a restorative justice partnership aimed to develop students' orientations and practices as rising criminal justice officers. She challenged students to think of their role as officers by raising questions such as "[H]ow can we truly, instead of carrying out a punishment,

help them [incarcerated people] think about what they've done—taking accountability and repairing and restoring." Thus, the faculty member hoped to develop not only students' professional abilities, but also their lens as citizens and their views on justice. This demonstrates two distinct but related outcomes that guide faculty members' motivations—civic learning and professional skill development.

Community partners reflected similar sentiments regarding the importance of student learning through their experiences. They spoke about providing an opportunity for students to apply their learning in the real world and engage with "real life issues." One community partner who worked in local government was challenged by a local official about the benefits of hosting service-learning students, to which the community partner responded, "I said it's got nothing to do with what they learned in books. It's, it's got to do with the fact that they can take on a subject and learn it." For this community partner, a student's ability to learn and apply the lessons to their project was a major asset for the rural government. Some community partners went beyond classroom learning and hoped that students would become more aware of organizational operations, missions and values. All community partners mentioned

how they generally enjoyed working with students, supporting their growth and development through mentor-mentee relationships.

Finding (b): Hopes and challenges of rural service-learning practice

While LSL emphasizes immediate organizing wins as successful social change, nearly all participants instead described their accomplishments as project outputs. These outputs reflected LSL's "knowledge power"—such as student-created research reports or other deliverables. Some community partners were savvy navigators of institutional resources and knew what they wanted to access within the project, such as expensive geographic information system software available through the university. One partner's organization was almost exclusively dependent upon highly trained drama students to perform in their Theater of the Oppressed community activities and spoke about ongoing hope for student collaboration.

Every participant identified numerous challenges as they described their projects and outcomes. All faculty spoke to the additional labor incurred when integrating service-learning into courses. Several faculty members described service-learning as an uncomfortable form of teaching, based on their own experiences and academic socialization. As one faculty member (Animal Science) shared: "I'm more comfortable teaching in lectures. Just lecturing at the students because it is me giving them information and so they're not as likely to ask me a question that I don't know the answer to." Other faculty spoke to challenges finding placements because of the lack of available partners to host service-learning students in rural areas.

In relation to LSL's understanding of service, only one faculty member (Public Liberal Arts) identified the challenges in intentionally creating meaningful partnerships: "... [to] listen to our community more carefully about what their needs are and really think about reciprocity as part of the equation." Another faculty member noted their shortcomings to achieve social justice learning outcomes for university students. The faculty member attributed this failure to the homogenous nature of many students' rural home communities, and students' lack of previous experiences with diversity and BIPOC communities.

For community partners, challenges with the service-learning projects reflected well-established concerns with higher education

civic engagement (Stoecker, et al., 2009). One partner noted that previous students had different academic or cultural backgrounds that did not match the needs identified when creating the project. Another partner found it challenging to keep momentum from one student project to the next. For example, one student worked on a communication plan and then the partner needed another student to implement it, which is a major issue with the academic calendar and service-learning projects (Stoecker et al., 2009). Connected to these logistical challenges, several community partners mentioned the mediums through which colleges and universities conduct outreach and build relationships. Participants spoke of being reached by universities through professional listservs (e.g., county managers), whereas other partnerships were generated through independent relationships, reflecting a divergence from LSL's constituency-focused model. An interesting pattern that emerged was the role of outreach to prospective partners through multiple channels over time. One community partner had previously interfaced with the local college through her interest in gardening and an event at the institution's garden. This positive relationship helped build trust for collaboration once she assumed her mayorship.

Long-term change. None of the participants spoke to significant structural changes resulting from their service-learning partnerships. Several of the community partners noted that students' final products were presented to local elites (e.g., county government) to inform future decision-making or awareness. While not creating systemic change, this finding indicates a long-term orientation in partnerships that reflects LSL's temporal view of change. Some faculty mentioned that community partners began reaching out for new or additional projects, building toward greater impact. One participant noted that through the collaboration they gained key resources such as equipment for outreach with 4-H (Flora et al., 2016). Another partner noted that they gained legitimacy from local community residents through multiple service-learning and college student volunteering projects, which spurned partnerships with county law enforcement:

[T]he university definitely helps in so many ways when it comes to the awareness piece. And when it comes to individuals being more "tolerant," though I hate to use that word, "tolerant" than they might

otherwise be because they are exposed to differences of opinion because of the university. (Community Organizer)

Many participants highlighted the challenge of longevity in supporting students and service-learning projects. All faculty members addressed time and resource constraints in supporting service-learning. For community partners, this burden was the time drain when mentoring and collaborating with students. The ongoing sustainability of supporting students was dependent upon students' abilities to meet the organizations' most immediate needs without relying on community partners' intensive labor to support them.

*Finding (c): Rural and institutional context
Students as future rural residents.*

One unexpected finding that spoke to rural development and the larger context of rural communities but was completely unaccounted for in LSL was the long-term prospects of rural college students staying in rural communities. Several community partners were focused on recruiting and retaining students to rural life. Participants hoped that students could envision themselves living in small rural communities by experiencing these communities through their service-learning projects. As one community partner shared:

...maybe their exposure... maybe among their friends and stuff, maybe small towns would be where they would like to be. That's one of my other things that I always think. [If] they're out in our community, maybe they would see that, 'oh that's a nice community.' (Local Government Official)

Faculty corroborated these hopes, as they spoke about current community partners who had been students in their courses and were now hosting students in classrooms, nonprofit organizations, and on local farms.

One faculty member working with pre-service teachers on diversity and inclusion identified that these students will more likely than not be working at their service sites in a professional capacity in the future and that their service experience and her course content were evolving to meet the community's needs. The education faculty member cited two students who are now community partners:

[T]he community partner is a former student of mine. It just gave me goosebumps. She was...She was in my class. She did the service-learning, then she graduated...complete[d] her master's degree in English as a second language. Then a position came up and she came back, and she got it and now she's the community partner. (Education Faculty)

The partnership's power within tight-knit communities became evident speaking with faculty members. However, these findings were not mirrored with the same depth among community partners due to their limited number in the study.

Participants did address broader structural pressures facing students, primarily the challenge of keeping talented young people in rural areas (Schafft, 2016). Participants were pragmatic in recognizing the assets educated young people have for rural communities, while noting the lack of opportunity, such as entry-level positions, for new college graduates. As one community partner shared:

[H]opefully, you know, there's a couple of them that stay, but you know, there's not a lot of good quality jobs here in [town] but, but then, you know, entrepreneurship, creating jobs, doing other things, you know, that's one of the ways that we can do it too. (Local Government Official)

Thus, there is a tension in hoping that students will stay in the local community while recognizing the limited immediate career prospects in various sectors. However, as this participant noted, the opportunities for entrepreneurship and resource availability are major assets that rural towns can provide innovative young people.

Community tensions in rural LSL. In addition to community partners' aspirations for students, when asked about local communities' perceptions in shaping their partnership, nearly all spoke to the tension between community members and the university and its students. A belief emerged in interviews that community members perceive the higher education institution as being politically liberal and working against the local community's interests. Responses varied depending on the institution type, with participants affiliated with the two liberal arts colleges speaking about deeper strains between their institutions and the community.

Related to this finding, universities' student bodies frequently increase local communities' racial and ethnic diversity. Participants noted that some community members are hostile to the diverse student population. One faculty member mentioned that students with historically marginalized racial and ethnic identities feel unwelcome outside the campus because of their social identities, which requires service-learning projects to keep students safe. While this is not representative of all campuses and student experiences, it raises an interesting point about the risks of service-learning in universities and rural communities. Relatedly, several participants raised an interesting paradox—despite the friction with student diversity, rural communities are experiencing increasing numbers of Latinx agriculture workers, and two participants saw this as untapped potential for university-community partnerships that build more welcoming communities as local regions grapple with changing demographics.

In addition to issues of racial justice, one of the more progressive community members identified that their partnership with the university legitimized their community organizing efforts in regard to community residents. Through their partnership, the community organization connected with previously hostile stakeholders and was able to expand programming and partnerships. One faculty member was able to build relationships with community members through their partnership and felt a deeper belonging to the local community both as a professional and in their personal life:

I don't feel always very settled in as a resident of [town]. I'll just, I'll say it that way, but my community-based work has done an incredible job of getting me off of our campus and connecting with people of different backgrounds, perspectives, etc. More than any single other thing that I've done. If I hadn't, if I weren't doing this work, my connection to my community would be greatly diminished. (Private Liberal Arts Faculty)

Overall, the tensions between universities and communities may be exacerbated in rural contexts. However, service-learning creates opportunities to increase a sense of belonging for both university faculty, students, staff and town and community members.

Broader context within the state. One theme that emerged from all conversations with faculty members was the macro factors of higher education and rural areas that makes service-learning difficult to deploy. Public college faculty spoke about the ongoing funding decreases that are straining their institutions' abilities to serve communities through more labor-intensive practices such as service-learning. Yet, service-learning faculty also noted that their institutional type, as teaching-focused universities, allow for more freedom to use innovative teaching programs like service-learning.

The role and potential of cooperative extension was a surprising theme that arose when discussing institutional type and statewide higher education systems with participants. Several faculty and community partners identified the potential and difficulty of integrating cooperative extension into their partnerships. One faculty member shared:

It used to be that they, you know, that there were multiple extension agents in every county and that doesn't exist anymore. So, you could have your, your piece of the puzzle and you can really do some amazing work. (Animal Science Faculty)

Several of the service-learning projects described by participants could have aligned with cooperative extension, however faculty members spoke about not being fully integrated with extension as they were not located within the land grant university. Moreover, extension agents, as perceived by many of the faculty members interviewed, were already stretched thin and therefore did not have the capacity to support an additional project through the local university. Once again, themes regarding funding and capacity became salient for expanding the capacity of these partnerships with extension.

Community partners who were strongly associated with local or regional government organizations identified that most of their funding comes from the state government and that without the university partnerships they would be unable to meet many of the residents' needs. Moreover, one community partner working in local government had been able to build deeper relationships with local legislators through a broader university-community initiative, increasing their ability to advocate for state funding that benefits their town and county. Two nongovernment-affiliated community partners

noted that through their partnerships they can see the value in the state continuing to support their local institutions. Together, this shows the complex web of relationships that arise in rural areas and the role of university-community partnerships to access more political and financial resources.

The last major contextual issue that emerged for this theme was the boundless possibilities of service-learning and campus-community partnerships perceived by many community partners and faculty members. All participants easily identified numerous social challenges worthy of service-learning projects: rural health, education, the opioid epidemic, small business development, sustainable agriculture, intergroup relationships, elder care, housing supplies, criminal justice, and gender-based violence.

Discussion

Educated students as community assets

While the LSL model and its theoretical underpinnings (Alinsky, 1989) is dismissive of anything less than immediately organizing for social change, the lens through which partners view student participants in service-learning raises questions about the framework's use within rural spaces. While Stoecker (2016) is critical of the circular and often indirect logic relating student outcomes and impacts (both in the community and academically), this study's data indicates that service-learning in rural areas is preparing students for community life with hopes that students will commit long term to the rural area, even though there is no causal data to support this conclusion.

Connecting educated young people to rural communities links to an important facet of community development: assets. Asset-based development has been rightfully critiqued as a neoliberal tool (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Stoecker, 2016). Yet for many of these rural communities, educated young people are an important community asset (Flora et al., 2016). Thus service-learning partners must understand how an educated young adult population, college students, fit into local and regional development goals. At the same time these partners and rural leaders must recognize that educated young people will most likely leave rural communities upon graduation to find career opportunities (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Universities, residents, and local leaders may use this drainage as an opportunity to

discuss development opportunities to “capture” young people (Ratner, 2020).

This consideration is especially important for faculty whose students service occurs in their professional fields, such as animal science and education. This outsized role of students complicates the LSL pillars of “change” and “learning” as faculty and community partners looked at service-learning as a long-term contributor for rural community wellbeing. Once again, this study points to the body of literature that supports positive and significant student growth and the challenges of its implementation (Jacoby, 1999; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Holland, 1997). However, there is a gap in understanding whether the service-learning experience affects students' professional and personal postgraduate lives to manifest real social change. Moreover, emerging scholarship shows rural communities that are able to recruit and retain young people have unique characteristics (Stoecker et al., 2017), calling for a greater understanding of local assets to apply this finding to diverse rural communities.

Political tensions and progressive change in rural communities

The data aligned closely with previous rural community development studies, noting that local institutions, in this case colleges and universities, play an integral role within their local communities and regions (Elliott, 2018; Goddard et al., 2014; Schafft, 2016). This research has an added complexity compared to the historical literature. Often implicitly, most previous research has situated studies around K-12 educational institutions that are more deeply embedded within local communities (Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014). The data here showed a different tension, between more conservative local communities and more progressive universities. While LSL calls for working with an organized constituency, the mistrust between the university and local community members due to perceived disparate political and ideological beliefs poses a larger barrier to building successful partnerships. This finding gives a more nuanced understanding to previous scholarship on the dynamics between universities and community (e.g., Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker et al., 2009), yet also highlights how important each parties' perceptions and obligations are when engaging in meaningful service-learning projects for development.

Relatedly, this finding indicates that partnerships between universities and local constituencies may bring forward ideological

tensions between partners or between the partnership and the wider community that has previously been unreported. While community development does not usually attend to conflict in substantial ways (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015), this study shows that faculty, community engagement professionals, and community partners may need to be explicit about the political dynamics surrounding their partnership. Findings demonstrate that rural service-learning partnerships tend to be more functionalist in their approach to social change, with local leaders collaborating with university faculty and staff in service-learning programming. Thus, the more conflict-oriented and emergent strategy that LSL calls for seems to be absent, at least at the local level.

Faculty. One element related to these dynamics is the insider-outsider status for faculty, as some faculty reported feeling more connected to the community and some participants voiced concerns about racially marginalized students' safety in community-based learning experiences. The LSL model failed to situate faculty as community members or having a "stake" in their project based on their own connection to the locality (Stoecker, 2016). On the basis of findings from this study, rural community members may perceive faculty and students as disconnected from the local community given the progressive/conservative dimensions, and service-learning may be a tool to help bridge this gap. Thus, both LSL and its critics have debated the bigger question of the purpose of students and how such projects can integrate faculty into local community life and be tapped as community resources (Flora et al., 2016).

Students. While this study has no concrete findings related to racially minoritized students' experiences of participating in rural service-learning, it does bring this issue, and race in rural America more generally, forward as a consideration for future scholarship and practice (Mitchell et al., 2012). This study reinforces the critiques made by Jacoby (2017), Mitchell (2017), and Hickmon et al., (2018) that LSL fails to attend to diverse student experiences, particularly around racial and ethnic identities. When connected with the changing landscape of rural America, especially in the north and west United States, LSL reinforces universities as important institutions to help navigate a challenging world, as local communities plan for and respond to changing demographics.

Rural social change

The core of the LSL model and rural development theory is the ability for local citizens to act on local issues (Carlton-Lanay, et al., 2013; Cavaye, 2001; Stoecker, 2016). What emerged through this study was a normative practice of service-learning projects partnering with local elites such as city managers, regional development officers, and agribusiness. Thus, rather than partnering with grassroots organizations (though two projects did), there was a more direct link to those who had significant economic or political power in the local area. These practices align with rural community development literature given the absence of robust nonprofit and social service infrastructure (Richardson & London, 2007). One important distinction that this study brought forward was that rural partnerships engage in regional or statewide political dynamics that involve conflict over resource distribution (e.g., state funding) (Woods, 2005). Therefore, a functionalist local approach might translate into more contentious organizing strategies in these larger socio-political arenas, especially as rural towns seek more regional coordination (Ratner, 2020).

Beyond these complex political dynamics related to social change, this study raises the question of how LSL can engage in social change across a diverse set of issues. A spectrum of pressing issues facing rural communities emerged in this study, and each require the kind of collaborative, multifaceted community-driven responses that LSL and PCD bring forward (Kenny, 2011). While LSL is a distinct framework grounded in critical theory and rural communities are perceived as politically conservative, a number of leading rural thought leaders and community organizers historically and presently frame rural America as the "internal colonies" to examine how urban areas exploit rural resources (Ikerd, 2018). This is often compounded with the United States' history of settler colonialism and the rurality of American Indian reservations, along with Black rural communities in the Deep South and growing Latinx populations in rural areas across the United States (Woods, 2005). Thus, LSL can be a useful framework for universities and communities across the nation as they contend with ongoing disinvestment, exploitation, and extraction in rural regions.

Limitations and Future Considerations

There are several limitations to this study. First

is the limited scope of the research project and number of participants. Because this study was confined to one geographic area, a limited sample size, and unique institutions, the findings cannot be applied to all rural communities. Additionally, participants self-selected to be part of the study, which was also conducted during the summer when many academic faculty are conducting fieldwork or absent from their institutions.

Considering the expansive scope of the LSL model, this study could not empirically capture data about behaviors and impacts of service programs. Rather, it used perceptions to examine and explore how these practices may have been at play in rural areas. Further studies should seek to explore the project creation process, their implementation, and impact for organizing-oriented service-learning projects. Additionally, future scholarship may examine the impact of more sustained partnership on rural areas, especially examining longitudinal change. Last, while this study touched on issues related to race, further research examining the role of race in a service-learning classroom and community are warranted. Research should examine how racially minoritized students experience community engagement in predominantly white rural communities, and how higher education civic engagement is responding to rural diversity to assure equitable and just communities for all.

Conclusion

As the service-learning and civic engagement movement continues to increase its impact with students and in communities, the LSL framework provides an important step to conceptually create balance and social change within partnerships. This study identified key considerations for the framework, particularly in the relationships among students, faculty, community members, and local elites. It also offers further data to help scholars and practitioners explore the unique context of communities and the political, racial, and economic contexts that inform service-learning that is seeking to create social change.

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