

Mucking Through the Swamp: Changing the Pedagogy of a Social Welfare Policy Course

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ABSTRACT. Despite the fact that social welfare problems do not lend themselves to rational definition and analysis, most undergraduate social welfare policy courses use technical rational approaches to teach policy analysis. This article argues that analysts need to descend from the high ground of rational analysis to the "swampy lowlands of human concern" (Schon, 1983; quoted in Zlotkowski, 2001, p. 24). The author reports that the inclusion of post-positivist methods such as service learning and community-based research increased students' enthusiasm and preparedness for social welfare policy analysis, enhanced the instructor's (and students') sense of civic engagement, and improved community collaboration efforts. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a hard, high ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the use of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowlands, problems are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant . . . however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. (Donald Schon, 1995; quoted in Zlotkowski, E., 2001, p. 24)

Should poor families be granted cash or in-kind benefits? What type and amount of health care should be made available to poor children and/or their parents? Should adopted children have the right to seek out their biological parents? These are only a few of the social problems social workers grapple with daily. Donald Schon (1983, 1995) characterizes these as messy and confusing problems, in contrast to manageable problems that can be solved using technical rational or systematic approaches. Unfortunately, Schon argues, professionals tend to stay on the high ground, applying research-based theories and techniques toward solving these problems.

Conducting policy analysis from the high ground, as referred to by Schon, suggests that the social problems of poverty, health-care access, or adoption, and their causes and consequences, can be rationally and objectively defined, predicted, and ameliorated. This approach assumes that the world essentially is objective and external to the individual and can be understood by an impassive and neutral observer. Similarly, a social welfare policy analyst working from the high ground is also assumed to be objective, detached, neutral, and disinterested from the social problem he/she studies. Understanding the point of view of those affected by the problem or policy is less important than a search for causal relationships or underlying regularities in the world of social affairs (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 5).

This approach does not and cannot work with the messiness inherent in problems of poverty, health care, or child welfare—indeed, all social welfare problems. Instead, Schon (1995) suggests that reflective practitioners are those who are willing to leave the high ground to muck through the swampy lowlands, confronting and intervening in the messy or “wicked” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) problems of human con-

cern. Given that most social welfare policy courses are taught from the high ground—rooted in positivist paradigms that assume one can best comprehend, evaluate, and explain the world through objective observation (White & Adams, 1994; Kelly & Maynard-Moody, 1994; Strand, 2000)—a call to “muck in the swamps” requires that an alternative pedagogical approach may be needed for social welfare policy courses, one that emphasizes collaboration between those who study problems and those who live with them.

In this paper, I discuss how an undergraduate social welfare course was changed with the aim of increasing students’ commitment to and preparedness for social action and advocacy, while also improving relationships between the academy and the community. In the first part of the paper, community-based research (CBR)—a specific type of service learning—is introduced and described as an alternative pedagogy for teaching social welfare policy courses. Community-based research provides a good fit with social work practice as both recognize the importance of developing relationships with others and both emphasize taking action to ameliorate problems. The second section of the paper is a case study in which undergraduate students used CBR to analyze the impact of the Violence Against Women Act on undocumented Latina women who were patients at a local health care clinic. In part three, the theories informing the use of community-based research are described as they provide the foundation for changing the course pedagogy. This section briefly describes positivist methods as the foundation for most social welfare policy courses, but argues that two alternative models of social science, interpretive and critical theories, may better represent the worldview of social workers and social welfare policy analysts. The paper concludes by considering the implications of adopting this pedagogical model for students, faculty, and community members.

COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Service learning as a pedagogy and process is receiving increased attention from many disciplines, including social work. While many social work courses, particularly the practicum sequence, involve experiential practice, unlike practica, service learning courses are not necessarily skill-based (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Rather, service learning courses are concerned with enhancing the “dialectic between theoretical paradigms and workplace/service site realities” (Zlotkowski, 1998, p. 4).

Rooted in pragmatic philosophy and democratic theory, service learning activities enable students to develop deeper awareness of their personal and social values, help them learn to identify and solve social problems, and increase their appreciation for diversity in culture, religion, and ethnic backgrounds (Zlotkowski, 1998).

Service learning courses generally share three characteristics. First, service learning requires that students engage in activities that address human needs, and those activities must be defined by the community, not the student (Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Maas-Weigert, 1998). Second, service learning emphasizes a sense of reciprocity and mutuality in human relationships (Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Enos & Troppe, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoads, 1997). One person is not the giver and the other the receiver; there is mutuality in giving and receiving. This eliminates a charitable sense of "doing for" and instead transforms students into "doing with" the community (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Third, service learning recognizes the importance of reflection in the learning process. Action must be followed by reflection in order for consciousness to be raised, learning to occur, and change to happen (Kolb, 1981; Zlotkowski, 2001; Delve Scheuerman, 1996; Rhoads, 1997). The outcome of service learning activities ought to be increased civic engagement, social responsibility, and/or democratic participation (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Lisman, 1998; Rhoads, 1997; Rocha, 2000).

Service learning is based on a belief in the social construction of reality, learning through engagement with others, and reflection that leads to action (Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Rhoads, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999). As such, it is grounded in ontological and epistemological assumptions that challenge the objective, neutral stance of the positivist paradigm. Community-based research (CBR) is a specific form of service learning that has been used to teach social research methods courses, courses similar to social welfare policy in structure and design (for a notable example, see Strand, 2000). Community-based research has some similarities to action-oriented research, as focus groups, interviews with program participants, and other types of qualitative research are typical activities of the researcher. However, what distinguishes CBR as a service learning activity is (1) an emphasis on collaboration between student researchers and community members in the research process; and (2) a goal to improve the lives of those in the community (Strand, 2000, p. 85).

Social workers might argue that community-based research is simply another name for needs assessment, and indeed, the two share some commonalities. Generally both involve collaboration between the re-

searcher and the community and both seek some type of change for those living with problems. However, community-based research differs from needs assessment in that the community, not the researcher, defines the problem. Moreover, the researcher and community members work side by side to understand the problem and intervene to create change. Community-based research, therefore, is a bottom-up as opposed to a top-down approach, including clients in the definition and analysis of the problem. Community-based research also requires that the researcher continue to work with the community beyond problem definition and analysis, so that he/she is actively involved in intervening with clients to help solve the social problem.

In short, community-based research may be an effective pedagogy for social welfare policy courses because it makes social problems and policies come alive by engaging students with community problems and members, particularly those affected by the social problem or policy; and it mandates that some type of social action be taken as part of the final effort.

BEGINNING THE COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

For many undergraduate students, social welfare policy ranks among their least preferred courses (Poppo & Leighninger, 1998; Wolk, Pray, Weismiller, & Dempsey, 1996). Some students have little interest in macro-level problems, preferring to work directly with individuals and families. Some struggle with feelings of inadequacy in attempting to understand social welfare policies. And some have difficulty applying policy analysis frameworks to the political, economic, and sociocultural complexities that characterize social welfare policies. The original purpose of leaving the high ground for the swampy lowlands, therefore, was to reduce the students' anxiety and facilitate their learning by providing them opportunities to work on real policy issues with community partners, who had been requesting university expertise and assistance in research and policy analysis efforts.

Although the basic course requirements remained the same—the completion of a policy analysis by semester's end—the process changed dramatically. First, rather than allow each student to select his or her policy project, the students worked jointly with the agency to determine the feasibility of the project. Second, the students worked together to gather and analyze data, although they continued to write their papers individ-

ually. Third, rather than focus primarily on secondary data sources, an emphasis was placed on developing relationships with agency representatives, clients, and other stakeholders. Finally, the instructor had to become more actively involved with the community partner and with the students in order to facilitate and monitor the process.

**AN EXAMPLE OF CBR:
THE IMPACT OF THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT
ON UNDOCUMENTED LATINA IMMIGRANTS**

Prior to the start of the semester, a health clinic serving Latino families contacted a practicum student to request assistance in exploring the effects of the Violence Against Women Act on their Latina patients who were undocumented immigrants and victims of domestic violence. The agency director, practicum student, and course instructor informally negotiated the parameters of the work. The clinic's intent was to determine whether these patients were familiar with their rights accorded by the Violence Against Women Act. Additionally, the clinic wanted more complete information about the domestic violence services available to their patients. The goal was to determine whether the clinic needed a written policy about domestic violence, particularly as it affected undocumented immigrants.

Once class began, the students and instructor determined whether to accept the project. It was important that the students be involved in selecting the problem to be studied in order to increase their ownership of the project. Additionally, the class needed to ascertain whether enough students had the skills necessary to complete the project as they agreed that Spanish-speaking abilities would be required if they were to interact with the patients and some of the service providers.

Upon accepting the project, the class went to the clinic so that the students and agency personnel could meet and begin to get acquainted with one another, and so that the students' anxiety about the neighborhood and/or clientele might diminish. Taking the class to the agency site was a crucial step in beginning the "descent from the high ground" as many students harbored spoken and unspoken fears about certain areas of the community and were reluctant to visit on their own.

Once an informal contract with the agency was established, the students coordinated their own transportation, managed their hours, and conducted their analysis independently. Additionally, just as the students began to interact more frequently with agency personnel and cli-

ents, they also began to interact more frequently with one another to discuss and share their research. Acting as their facilitator, the instructor encouraged the students to delegate tasks such as survey construction, interview assignments, library research, etc. An added bonus of the course was the use of an internet-based workspace on which students posted their task schedules, interview transcripts, any relevant articles they found, messages to one another, etc. This facilitated communication among them and also allowed the instructor the opportunity to monitor their individual and group progress.

Although the course was now rooted in a post-positivist paradigm, the students' data collection process included both positivist and post-positivist methods. Positivist methodology was evident in their examination of articles and governmental publications from the library, development and use of surveys, and analysis of existing data. Additionally, the students continued to use a prescribed analytical framework to direct their work (see Chambers, 1993).

Post-positivism was evident in the use of community-based research, which emphasizes the inclusion of the "knowledge and world views of powerless people" (Strand, 2000, p. 85). In addition to conducting interviews with domestic violence service providers, attorneys, police officers, and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) representatives, two students who were fluent in Spanish developed and attempted to administer a survey in Spanish to the clinic's Latina patients. Unfortunately, the students were unable to speak with more than two patients, as most of the women opted not to complete the survey. Moreover, when other strategies were attempted, e.g., having a nurse or physician administer the surveys or asking the patients to complete a written questionnaire—none were effective. Given the sensitivity of the many issues involved, i.e., domestic violence, undocumented status, cultural differences between patients and researchers, they were disappointed, but not surprised. This experience confirmed for the students that "social research is seldom as linear, systematic, and subject to the researcher's control as textbook discussions would have [them] believe" (Strand, 2000, p. 89).

Nevertheless, because community-based research emphasizes the importance of hearing multiple perspectives and worldviews in order to understand the social problem, the students demonstrated persistence and flexibility in locating and speaking with key stakeholders. For example, three students attempted to contact the INS, but all had difficulty in getting through to the appropriate representative. One student called the agency, but could not bypass the automated system. Another student attempted to use the Internet, but had no luck. Finally, the students drove to the agency, where once again they encountered resistance in attempting

to speak with an employee. However, when one of the students mentioned the name of our university, an INS employee who had also attended the same university agreed to speak to them. As one student said, "It took us so long to figure out the 'secret handshake,' and although we discovered it at INS, we never learned what it was with the Latina patients." Particularly due to their difficulties in gaining access to service providers, the students' *verstehen* or empathic understanding for these women's reluctance to seek help increased far more than it would have had we conducted this analysis from the comfort of the classroom.

Finally, knowing that one goal of CBR is to help improve the lives of those in the community, the students were required to do more than write a policy analysis of the Violence Against Women Act and its effects on undocumented Latina immigrants. Two students shared their analysis and recommendations with the director of the health clinic, who indicated that she would be implementing some of their suggestions. Another student presented the results of her findings at a local conference, in a session composed of several of the agency representatives who had been interviewed. And particularly gratifying for the students, the entire class was given the opportunity to present the project at a national conference.

A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL THEORIES THAT INFORM SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

Positivist methods of research, although challenged by many social science researchers (Heineman-Pieper, Tyson, & Heineman-Pieper, 2002), continue to be the predominant approach used to teach social welfare policy courses. Two alternative epistemologies are emerging, however, that may better represent the social workers' worldview and value stance: interpretive and critical social science (White, 1994; Strand, 2000; Yanow, 2000). This section briefly describes and critiques positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory in order to develop a post-positivist paradigm that forms the foundation of community-based research and, by extension, the revised social welfare policy course.

Positivism

Social welfare policy courses have been dominated by a positivistic paradigm that assumes that we can best comprehend, evaluate, and explain the world (and social welfare problems) through objective obser-

vation (White & Adams, 1994; Kelly & Maynard-Moody, 1994; Strand, 2000). Positivists view human beings as "rational, self-interested actors who are largely shaped by external forces" (Strand, p. 91). Moreover, they assume there are universal laws that govern human behavior, and that neutral observation will allow the facts to speak for themselves (Strand, 2000; Kelly & Maynard-Moody, 1994). Value neutrality is essential in order not to distort reality, and the analyst is responsible for approaching the policy or program free of human bias and value judgments (Yanow, 2000). In other words, the analyst must be able to stand outside of the policy issue being studied, "free of its values and meanings and of the analyst's own values, beliefs, and feelings" (Yanow, 2000, p. 6). It is through this detached, neutral, and objective stance that the policy analyst determines the "truth" about the policy, thereby ensuring the validity of the findings.

The positivist paradigm offers benefits for students new to policy analysis. First, the standardized nature of the analytical framework suggests that students will be thorough and complete in their description and analysis of the operating characteristics in the policy or program. Rather than having to guess at which elements to describe and analyze, students use existing analytical frameworks developed by experts. Additionally, standardized frameworks suggest that analysts will use the model consistently across programs and policies, reducing bias and subjectivity.

Second, for younger students with limited life experience, it is good practice to adopt a position of value neutrality in order to allow the facts to speak for themselves. While social work students are often admired for their passion and commitment toward marginalized populations, that passion can limit their credibility with policymakers. Many of us are familiar with being characterized as "liberal do-gooders" or idealists. In separating their own values and biases from that of other stakeholders, students gain experience in objectively analyzing social welfare policies, increasing the possibility that policymakers will seriously consider their recommendations.

There are limits to the positivist paradigm, however. By assuming that objective truth is discovered through separate dispassionate study, the positivist method neglects the lived experience of people suffering from the problem and/or affected by the policy. In other words, positivist methods ignore the subjective and individual experience of each of the actors or "stakeholders" involved in the social problem or policy. Students who rely primarily on library or Internet research, for example,

commonly neglect, ignore, or minimize the lived experience of those who suffer from the problem.

Second, positivism assumes that people are rational; therefore, it is possible to develop universal laws that govern human behavior (White, 1994; Burrell & Morgan, 1979). In the social welfare policy realm, the rational basis underlying analytical frameworks often leads students to assume, for example, that goals and objectives will not only be written, they will be followed. Students struggle to understand how policies and programs function without clearly identified goals and objectives, benefits, eligibility rules, service delivery methods, and financing systems. They also struggle to comprehend how a program can continue when the policy-in-action does not match the policy-in-theory. By ignoring the non-rational aspects of human behavior, positivist methods do not allow students to consider the ways in which people influence and are influenced by—for better or worse—policy implementation.

Finally, and arguably most important, by emphasizing an objective analysis of factual data and minimizing the influence of subjective experiences, positivist methods may lead to analyses that are not relevant for social welfare programs and policies—and by extension, the people who are dependent upon them for their well-being. For social welfare policy students, positivist methods may not adequately prepare them for influencing or modifying policies in their agencies and communities, which is a goal of the social welfare policy course.

Interpretive Social Science

Interpretive research recognizes the influence of multiple subjective experiences and perspectives on social reality. In this perspective, social reality is not external to people, but rather, influences and is influenced by the interactions between individuals and their environments. The goal of interpretive research is to enhance understanding of social situations for the researcher (analyst) and those affected by the situation so that both may discover human possibilities (White, 1994, p. 45; Yanow, 2000). Moreover, an assumption of interpretive research is that understanding cannot be gained unless one considers the meanings that the actors attach to their situations, their own actions, and the actions of others (White, p. 45). Some of the methods commonly used by interpretive social scientists are field research and participant observation, for it is only by interacting with others that one is able to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Strand, 2000).

Although students have always been encouraged to interview key experts and participants in social welfare programs, when working from the high ground, they did not develop relationships or interact with others in order to gain a deeper understanding of them. However, interpretive theory challenges the role and status differentials that separate the "expert" researcher and the community member. Students may be able to conduct field research from the "expert" position; they may be able to conduct participant observation research without interacting or even understanding the group they are studying. Indeed, when conducting the course from the positivist paradigm, students often used these methods to gather information, but this did not mean they gained empathic understanding of the people or the problem.

In drawing on the interpretive approach, one goal was that students would learn to value "data in the form of words" (Strand, 2000, p. 91) as much as they valued statistics, gain a deeper understanding of the social problem, and acknowledge both the benefits and limits of the policy from multiple perspectives. Moreover, by interacting with community members, the hope was that students would be better able to recognize and appreciate the values, beliefs, and experiences of all the actors involved in the problem, which would facilitate their ability to recognize and acknowledge their own values and beliefs (Rhoads, 1997).

Critical Social Science

If, as some of us believe, the goal of the social welfare policy analyst is to change, support, or modify policies, then critical theory may provide a great deal of direction to beginning analysts as it challenges us to recognize "inconsistencies between what is true and false, good and bad" (White, 1994, p. 46). With roots in Marxism, the focus of critical social science is on the effects that power and inequality have on social reality, particularly those who are oppressed (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Strand, 2000).

The goal for most critical theorists is to reveal society for what it is in order to lay the foundation for human emancipation through social change (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Critical theorists seek to raise the consciousness of people living within modern capitalist society so that they understand the ways in which they are alienated from themselves and the world around them.

With an emphasis on consciousness and self-reflection, social action and change, critical theory is particularly applicable to social welfare policy courses. Yet, with the exception of Donald Chambers' text, few

social welfare policy textbooks recognize the value that critical theory holds for the "practical policy analyst" (Chambers, 1993). Because critical theory emphasizes the recognition of social injustices, and because social welfare policy courses focus on policies, laws, and programs that address injustices, it makes sense for students to develop relationships with the people who suffer from injustices in order to raise their own awareness, i.e., consciousness, about the problem and resulting policy. Students are then better able to reflect upon their thoughts and actions in relation to the social problem, policy, and community agency, thus facilitating their ability to make judgments of fact and value (White, 1994). Reading sociological essays about oppressed populations, viewing videotapes, and/or engaging in class discussions are helpful in increasing students' awareness of social welfare problems and policies, but they do not go far enough in promoting students' deep understanding of social welfare problems and policies.

Again, although students were encouraged to interview marginalized and oppressed populations, before integrating critical theory into the course, they were not encouraged to develop relationships with them. Admittedly, this is an area that needs further work, as even now, students tend to focus more on developing relationships with agency personnel and other key experts than they do with clients. Moreover, because some students tend to view their service in terms of charity, these students are unable to take in the ideal of mutuality—the concept that the relationship between the student and client is established on principles of equality so that both decide on the nature of the service to be rendered and both benefit from the service (Rhoads, 1997, p. 220; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000).

Critical theory emphasizes that power and decision-making should be shared, suggesting that the research process should also be shared. This turns the policy analysis process on its head, as selecting a problem to be studied begins with an agency or community member, not with the student. Moreover, the course syllabus, time frames, and other logistical issues need constant negotiation in order to accommodate the student, the agency or community member, and the professor. Ultimately, however, the completed policy analysis is owned as much or more by the community partner as it is by the students, increasing the chance that the analysis will be more relevant for the stakeholders (Strand, 2000). This approach empowers both the students and those affected by the policy, helping students to recognize the power and action that come from more equitable social relations (Rhoads, 1997; Strand, 2000, p. 92).

Finally, critical theory suggests that injustices should be revealed in order to facilitate social action and policy change. Policy analysis that

merely describes a policy and its component parts is incomplete. As Donald Chambers says, "The hope is to present a method that will result in [the analyst's] discontent with the old and a strong motive to create something new and better" (1993, p. 71). With this in mind, students are required to do more than write a policy analysis paper at the conclusion of the course. They must use their analysis to take some action about the social problem or policy. As a result, some students have written letters to their elected representatives at local, state, and federal levels; some have sent their recommendations to the agency or program; and some have presented their findings at conferences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND THE COMMUNITY

Making a decision to change the direction of a course is not an easy one, nor should it be. In this paper, I have tried to show that by adding community-based research to a social welfare policy course, student commitment to social policy improves, civic responsibility is enhanced, and collaboration between the university and community partners may increase. I have also tried to show that an epistemological framework that recognizes the contributions of positivist, interpretive, and critical approaches may be the best pedagogical approach for teaching social welfare policy.

Students

Many of the students claimed they were more enthusiastic about the social welfare policy class than their other classes because it had a real purpose for a real agency. They reported that they gained a deeper understanding of the social problem than they would have received had they not been immersed in the community, and a deeper commitment to social action and change. At the same time, the students supported the continued use of a positivist analytical framework for describing and analyzing the social problem and policy, as it provided them with some direction and standardization when the field experience felt turbulent and unpredictable.

Although the students continued to experience some anxiety during the course, those feelings tended to be situation specific, i.e., "Will I be competent to interview this service provider?" rather than the more pervasive and chronic anxiety of earlier classes. However, some students

continued to dislike the course, and although they did not elaborate their reasons, they did not participate as actively as others. Of the students who participated in the changed course, however, several are pursuing policy-related activities in either employment or graduate studies. This suggests that these students may feel more prepared for working at a macro level than earlier cohorts.

The primary drawback of the course, according to the students (and confirmed in the service learning literature), was the time it required. Without exception, all the students claimed that they worked harder in the social welfare policy course than in the rest of their classes.

Faculty

Although course development and preparation are important aspects of teaching, faculty members who rely primarily on a text to establish the syllabus and set the direction of a course are doing a disservice to the course topic and the students they teach. Faculty members need to critically consider their pedagogical goals so that they construct courses that link theory to practice in a clear and coherent manner.

Additionally, while community-based research is an effective pedagogical tool in meeting the course goals, it requires more time outside the classroom with students and community partners (Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; Enos & Troppe, 1996), and it requires flexibility as the professor's role changes from "expert" to facilitator (Zlotkowski, 2001). However, helping the students connect with community partners, working side by side with them, and witnessing their frustrations and joys in conducting "real" analyses have resulted not only in an increase in the students' sense of social responsibility and civic engagement, but the instructor's as well.

Community

The key difference between the course as it was and the course as it is becoming is the emphasis on community collaboration. Clients, agency representatives and other stakeholders are integral to helping students and faculty understand the benefits and limitations of social welfare policies, and ideally should be consulted throughout the policy analysis process. However, this continues to be the greatest challenge. Non-profit agencies are often short-staffed and although they may be enthusiastic about working with students, may not have the time necessary for supervising or monitoring their work. Helping them work with the

students rather than simply turning the project over to the class requires many on-site meetings and discussions. Additionally, if the relationship between the students and the community partner is not supported or nurtured, there are risks of misunderstandings and/or misrepresentations. In the health clinic example discussed previously, while the agency director expressed gratification for the students' recommendations and a commitment to implementing some of them, she also believed that the students operated from an idealistic perspective and did not fully understand the impact of politics on the agency's policies and procedures. Overall, however, the agency director believed that the students provided a valuable service to the agency by researching, reporting, and making recommendations about a policy that affected the clinic's patients.

Although the social work program is not short of community agencies requesting our services to complete policy analyses, we need to consider whether partnering with an agency is true partnership with those affected by the problem. Put simply, if a social agency defines a social problem, would the "community" define it the same way? Although definitions of "community," "common good," and "public welfare" are outside the purview of this paper, these are issues that require deliberation. Meanwhile, the department continues to seek ways to engage with community agencies and people affected by social problems, and finds that students, community partners, and service learning faculty generally concur that the struggle is worth the effort.

In sum, while teaching social welfare policy from the comfort of the high ground may allow the instructor the illusion of control and direction of the class, it does not mitigate students' anxiety, help them learn policy analysis, or meet the needs of the community. Using community-based research as a way to descend to the swamps has been messy, yes, but it has also enabled students, faculty, and community members to work on real problems that may lead to real benefits for those who are most dependent on social welfare policies.

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