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Using Community Based Learning to Advance Student Understanding of the Homeless

Stephanie Southworth  and Sara Brallier

Coastal Carolina University

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a community based learning project organized to improve students' understanding of the structural components of homelessness, reduce stereotypes, and encourage students to engage in social justice activism on behalf of the homeless. This paper explains the goals of this project, student outcomes, research findings, and the successes and limitations of the course structure.

KEYWORDS

Community based learning; homelessness; poverty; qualitative research

Introduction

Stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness are so common that even the most informed citizens find it difficult to understand the structural conditions that impact homelessness (Lee, Farrell, and Link 2004; Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010). Most people, even those who consider themselves open-minded, believe homeless individuals are largely responsible for their own situation (Gudrais 2008; The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007).

According to Blouin and Perry (2009), sociologists are well-positioned to use community-based learning to help students understand the complex and multifaceted nature of social problems, as well as better understand the experiences of marginalized populations. This paper describes an applied research project integrated into two upper-level sociology courses. The purpose of the research project was to investigate gaps in services offered to homeless individuals in the local community. The goals of the courses were to improve students' understanding of the structural components of homelessness, reduce their stereotypes of the people experiencing homelessness, and encourage students to engage in social justice activism on behalf of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a persistent problem both nationally (Tsai et al. 2019) and locally. According to the

Department of Housing and Urban Development's annual Point-In-Time Count of the homeless, over half of a million individuals in the United States were experiencing homelessness on a single night in 2018 (National Alliance to End Homelessness Poverty 2019a). The local Point-in-Time Count found 480 homeless individuals in the county in which the study took place; however, it is likely that this number vastly underestimates the true number of homeless due to the difficulties inherent in trying to count them (South Carolina Interagency Council on Homelessness & Civitas and LLC 2017). Although gaining an exact count is difficult, we do know that the homeless population is as diverse as the larger national population (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2019b). The diversity of people experiencing homelessness means that there is not one simple solution for solving their housing crisis. Risk factors for homelessness include the need for mental health counseling or medical treatment, drug or alcohol rehabilitation, lack of employment or affordable housing, or the necessity of a safe place to stay because of a domestic situation (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2019b).

One of the barriers to securing more resources for people experiencing homelessness is the negative perceptions of homeless individuals held by service providers, politicians, and the general public (Belcher and Deforge 2012). The stigma and discrimination that homeless individuals face are often viewed by the general public as legitimate. Community perception is important because it influences public policy, whether

those perceptions are accurate or not. If homelessness is a problem that most of the public believes can be solved through an individual's hard work and effort, structural solutions to homelessness will not be researched or addressed by politicians and city officials (Belcher and Deforge 2012).

Community based learning and homelessness

Community-based learning is a useful vehicle for exposing students to disadvantaged groups and providing students with the tools to understand and critically analyze social problems (Blouin and Perry 2009). Clark and Spaulding-Givens (2016) define community-based learning as "learning experiences that are created to take place in community settings for the dual purpose of engaging in learning opportunities and personal change through a transformation of attitudes, beliefs, or values" (p. 127). In community based learning courses, students spend part of their class time volunteering in the community so that they are able to participate in the topic they are studying. This type of learning provides the opportunity for students to move beyond textbooks and lecture to create linkages between coursework and the realities of society. These linkages help students to better understand the relationship between individual problems and social structures, resulting in a broader and deeper understanding of course content than accessible to students in a typical college course (Bingle, Hatcher, and McIntosh 2006; Clark and Spaulding-Givens 2016; McKinney and Snedker 2017). Undergraduate students who participate in these types of courses have the potential to develop a greater comprehension of the complexity of social problems and increase their tolerance and understanding of disadvantaged populations (Rice and Horn 2014). These traits are valuable within academia, the workforce, and the community (Clark and Spaulding-Givens 2016; Mobley 2007; Roschelle, Turpin, and Elias 2000). In addition, community-based learning helps reduce students' stereotypical attitudes and beliefs, and increase civic engagement and social advocacy (Bowen 2014; Felten and Clayton 2011; Rice and Horn 2014).

Including students in community research has the potential to create and/or strengthen relationships among local stakeholders, service providers, and the university and ultimately improve the community (Bowen 2014; Clark and Spaulding-Givens 2016; Felten and Clayton 2011; Furco 2010). For example, students who volunteer and engage in research in local organizations provide the public face for the

university. The research students conduct via their classes can impact policies and practices in the local community, creating relationships and/or ties between the stakeholders and university that would not otherwise exist. (Maher, Pennell, and Osterman 2003).

Course and project description

In the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017, students in two social inequality courses (Social Inequality and Sociology of Poverty) worked on an applied research study in conjunction with a local homeless shelter. This project was the cornerstone of the courses; all the instructional materials and class activities related to participation in the community-based learning project.

The purpose of the study was to investigate what resources and services homeless individuals believe would enable them to secure permanent housing. Students in the course volunteered in local homeless shelters and conducted a survey of people experiencing homelessness. The questions on the survey included, (1) What services do respondents use? (e.g., local food pantries/banks/, referral services, medical services) (2) How useful are the services offered in meeting their needs (e.g., are they able to obtain food, medical treatment, mental health treatment, clothing, a place to bathe) (3) What types of services and/or donations would be beneficial? Respondents were also asked to provide information about their social and demographic characteristics, experiences with homelessness, work experiences, physical and mental health, and experience with transportation.

The courses engaged in this project were each fifteen weeks, semester long, courses. Along with regular coursework (tests and papers) students were required to spend part of their time in the local homeless shelter. Students in the courses were required to volunteer a minimum of 12 hours in the shelter over the course of the semester and conduct at least one interview with a homeless individual. Their final paper was a critical reflection of each student's experiences, integrating course content into their paper. Volunteering, interviews, and the critical reflection comprised about 60% of students' total grade. The courses were open to all undergraduate students at the university who had completed either SOC 101 (Introductory Sociology) or SOC 102 (Social Problems). Twenty-nine students enrolled in SOC 309 (Social Inequality) and 29 students enrolled in SOC 311 (Sociology of Poverty). Of the 58 students, four enrolled in both classes. (20 males and 38 females). Thirty-one of the students were white, and 23 were black. Forty-five

were seniors, ten were juniors, and three were sophomores. Both courses were designated as “experiential learning” classes by the university, so students were aware that out- of-classroom activities were required. Students who were unwilling or unable to participate were encouraged to enroll in another social inequality course (four students in each of the semesters dropped the course).

The professor sought to integrate discussion of the project into course lectures provide information on both local and national policies affecting the homeless population and allow students with multiple opportunities for reflection. She also provided students with a social scientific overview of how individual experiences in social reality are unequal given the stratified nature of the world.

In the first course, Social Inequality, the professor covered historical trends in inequalities as well as contemporary hierarchical social arrangements. She focused on how different forms of inequality are maintained and replicated via individual behaviors and the operation of different socio-cultural institutions. The professor also encouraged students to analyze the efforts to challenge unjust inequalities within communities and nation-states world-wide.

In the spring semester, the professor taught Sociology of Poverty. This semester long course serves as an introduction to the sociological study of poverty. The instructor covered the history of poverty and homelessness and policies targeted to combat poverty. Theoretical explanations and causes and consequences of poverty and homelessness, along with solutions, were discussed. In this course, students were given a pre-and-post test to measure their stereotypes about poverty and homelessness. Students also organized a fundraiser based on the needs expressed in the completed surveys and submitted an end-of-course reflection. For both courses, volunteering, fundraising, interviews, and the critical reflection comprised about 60% of students’ total grade.

The courses were designed to cover unique material and students were encouraged (but not required) to take them sequentially. Both courses were designed to give students experience in qualitative methods, improve students’ understanding of the structural components of homelessness, increase students’ presence in the local community, and work to create meaningful change informed by stakeholders.

The experiential learning project

Before the beginning of the fall 2016 semester, the faculty members met with the executive director, the

assistant director, and a member of the board of directors of the Men’s and Women’s shelters to discuss the project and the most appropriate ways for students to volunteer. The shelter personnel appeared enthusiastic about having students come in to volunteer and conduct the interviews (Author 2016). For both courses students were required to participate in an online research ethics training course (www.citi-program.org) before they could complete their field-work. In addition, guidelines for working with vulnerable populations, ethics, and qualitative methods training was conducted in class. The professors, as well as the students, were then given IRB approval to continue the project.

There has been some criticism of community-based projects as being added to courses with little to no connection to the instructional material (Mooney and Edwards 2001; Rice and Horn 2014). Prior to volunteering at one of the shelters, the professor and students discussed sociological research and theories on homelessness, strategies for working with and the ethical treatment of marginalized populations, as well as practiced the skills needed to conduct the interviews. Students first volunteered in one of the local area shelters to gain familiarity with, and an understanding of, the population they were studying. Then each student, along with a faculty member, conducted interviews with homeless individuals about the ways in which their needs were or were not being met by the local service providers. At the end of the first semester, the students held a supply drive based on information gathered in the interviews. In the second semester, they held a fundraiser to raise money for bikes, a need documented in the interviews of the previous semester. Thus, all students followed a similar path: training, volunteering to gain familiarity with participants, interview, and action. These courses were designed so that classwork and group discussions encouraged students to critically reflect on their volunteer work and data collection. Throughout the course, students and faculty met to share experiences and reflected on what they were learning.

Methods and data

Students’ understanding of the structural components of homelessness were assessed using end of the semester reflection papers in which they described their volunteer work/fundraising and reflected upon their experience. They were expected to link their volunteer experience to three academic sources and the course material. A successful reflection essay showed that

they understood the relationship between social structure and individual outcomes. Although we wanted to know how they felt about their experience, the primary focus in grading is the extent to which the students were able to connect course content to their experiences. For example, we wanted students to show that they understood the structural barriers (e.g., lack of living-wage jobs or low-income housing, or the criminalization of homelessness) faced by people experiencing homelessness and could connect that knowledge to their semester's work.

To identify themes in the students' reflective essays, we used a multistage inductive process (Maguire and Delahunt 2017) modeled after the thematic analysis approach articulated by Braun and Clark (2006). The authors began their data analysis by reading the reflection papers independently and generated and coded themes. The authors discussed and agreed on the primary themes included in this paper. In order to be considered primary, the theme needed to have been discussed extensively and with specificity in 40% (or 23 of the 58) of the reflection papers.

In addition to the reflection papers, at the end of the Sociology of Poverty course, students' perceptions of homelessness were assessed using a pre and post test. All questions were formatted with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Students were asked questions regarding their perceptions of homeless individuals and the community's responsibilities to homeless individuals.

Student outcomes

Reducing students' stereotypes of the homeless

In their final essays, 50 percent of students indicated that their perceptions homeless individuals changed because of their participation in the experiential learning project. Many students indicated that were nervous when they first entered the shelter. Some thought the shelter would be dirty and dangerous as reflected in the following:

For me I always pictured homeless shelters to be worn down crowded places filled with people that just have a free place to stay. But within the first hour I realized I was wrong; the building was fine and everyone there was friendly – which I was not expecting at all.

Others thought that all the individuals in the men's shelter would be addicts, lazy, or ungrateful. The following comment is indicative of the surprise many students felt when learning that the men were not as stereotypical as students thought they would be:

Before taking this class, if someone had asked me to describe my definition of a homeless person, my description would have probably been someone who is lazy, not motivated, and someone who had gone down the wrong path is life (drug dealer). However, this class has given me a different perspective and has been a real eye opener. This class made me realize that some homeless people are just down on their luck and would do anything to get out of the situation they are in.

Most of the students (94%) were surprised that the shelters were clean and that the residents were nice. In fact, three students became mentors to some of the residents at the men's shelter after their community service was complete. Students were also shocked that the residents of the men's shelter were not all taking drugs and leering at women. These examples are indicative of the themes of almost all the end of semester essays.

Integration of course material

In this course the professor sought to integrate class lectures, the readings, and out of class experiences. The end of course reflections for both courses showed that students were capable of making connections between real life and course content. Only four students did not display this ability. The following statements are examples of the ways in which students coconnected the course content to their out of class experiences:

As highlighted in Mitch Dunier's *Sidewalk*, the homeless value respect, and a job gives them respect. Using a bike to get to work helps them keep the respect they need.

Along with the book "Eviction" the interviews really opened my eyes. The interviews helped me understand what the book was trying to portray. "Many of Dunier's examples... came to life when I was asking for donations... People would ask me the cause and once they found out it was for the benefit of the homeless community they would be quick to remark, 'Why can't they get a job?'"

Pre/post tests

In the Sociology of Poverty course, the professor assessed students' perceptions of homelessness using a pre and posttest using a Likert Scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Because the N is small (21 students took both tests) significance tests would not be accurate and thus we were only able to look at differences in averages between the pre and post test scores. The means of student responses were as we

hoped they would be. After completing the course students were, on average, more likely to understand that homelessness is a social problem. They were less likely to agree that most homeless are drug addicts and that the best policy for eliminating homelessness is to send them to other areas.

Students were more likely to agree that they want to live in an area that provides resources to the homeless and that poverty can be eliminated. They were also able to understand that there are not plenty of resources for the homeless and that many homeless want to work. In addition, they were more likely to disagree that the problems of the homeless are caused because they do not work hard enough.

Improving students' understanding of the structural components of homelessness

Throughout course discussion and end-of-course papers (See [Appendix A](#) for final paper rubric) there was a consistent theme of students moving away from the mindset that homeless individuals are solely responsible for their plight and toward recognizing the structural components that contribute to homelessness. Students' critical reflection papers demonstrated that they were examining the context in which their previous assumptions were made and beginning to revise those assumptions based on their experiences in the shelters.

In the student papers, 50 percent of the students indicated that these courses deepened their understanding of how structural barriers, such as lack of affordable housing and the high cost of living, contribute to homelessness. Approximately 30 percent of students expressed surprise when the people they interviewed discussed having, and keeping, jobs. Students began to question how people with low wage employment managed to ever become housed and how the salary offered at a full-time job was not enough to afford housing. Comments from student reflections include:

Not having affordable housing, no jobs in range, and subprime loans, are all structural reasons for someone to be homeless with unaffordable housing being the main one.

So many people assume that if you are homeless, you don't have a job. After learning that some of the residents at the shelter did work, it made me realize how hard it must be for them to keep their jobs. They either have to walk or rely on some type of public transportation. Not only is getting to work hard, but going to doctors' appointments or legal appointments becomes a strain as well...If you are

limited on means of transportation that means that you are also limited to the places you can work. A job may hiring ten miles away, but it would be too far to walk and bus fare would be costly.

Plan to engage in community engagement/activism in the future

One of the goals of this project was to encourage students to develop the skills, drive, and assurance to become advocates for disadvantaged populations and to advocate for social change. Thirty-six percent of student papers indicated that as a result of their participation in the project, they planned to continue working with the homeless community. Student responses included:

... I have encouraged people to volunteer themselves and to donate what they can when they can. Now that I have a much better understating of what is really going on and how I can help I do plan to volunteer more on my own time and to keep learning more about the truths of poverty and homelessness.

I am thankful to you for making me do this. I never would have went to the men's shelter on my own...It was a very interesting experience for me and I want to keep volunteering to help these men in any way I can.

For several students, their efforts continued after the course and the coursework was completed. After the first semester, five students created an independent study course to further investigate issues of homelessness. The independent study students helped to organize a spring fundraiser and presented their findings at a local conference. One of those students student became an intern at one of the agencies involved in the project which led to a full time position in the agency. Another student continues to visit the men's shelter, providing emotional support to some of the men there, and, in one case, giving a much-needed job reference to one of the shelter residents.

Life changing experience

Forty-seven percent of the students reported that the project was a life-changing experience. The students indicated that they had never interacted (knowingly) with a homeless individual prior to taking this class. They felt that participating in the community-based learning project was eye-opening, gave them a better understanding of the struggles people living in poverty face, and that this experience would positively impact them as they moved forward in their academic and professional careers.

“This experience was one of the most vital in my life. . . . We live in a world where our perspective is the only perspective there is. This class changed that. I now see in the eyes of those that go through this system.

“I personally believe every student should have to take this class, this class was very rewarding especially going to the womens/mens shelter for community service and being able to talk to the people there. . . .This class has given me a different perspective on homelessness/poverty and made me look at my life and become more appreciative of the little things in life.”

“I believe it would be in all students’ best interest to make this, or a similar course, a requirement to graduate.”

Encouraging students to engage in social justice activism on behalf of individuals experiencing homelessness

In the spring semester, the professor presented results from the data collected during the fall to the students in her Sociology of Poverty course. Students were encouraged to use the findings to explore ways to address the needs identified by the members of the homeless community. The professor presented the findings that 92 percent of respondents indicated that they were able to get food when hungry and 80 percent were able to obtain clothing. Seventy-one percent reported they had access to medical treatment. The need that was not adequately being met, was transportation. Fifty-five percent of the homeless individuals interviewed expressed a need for more reliable transportation. A lack of a comprehensive bus system, a car, or other dependable transportation was a major impediment for the homeless in obtaining and keeping jobs, getting to the doctor, and other day-to-day tasks. Although 61 percent of the shelter residents were often able to walk where they needed to go, several individuals reported that the time it took to get from one place to another, being homeless, and walking in the weather (the local area is hot and humid nine months of the year and rains regularly) and experiencing homelessness were factors in employers’ decisions not to hire them.

Using this information, the professor decided to have the students hold a fundraiser to help with the need for transportation identified in the surveys. Students in the spring course planned the fundraiser which included a raffle and six-hour event on the main lawn of the college campus. The students advertised the event, planned games, sought donations for the raffle from the local businesses, sold raffle tickets

prior to the event, and staffed the event. During the event, as faculty and students walked by, the students from the class were able to confidently discuss why they were engaging in this fundraising event. They used information from the course and their experiences to have conversations about issues in the homeless community. This on campus event raised five hundred dollars for transportation for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Lessons learned/limitations

Overall, the community-based learning courses were rewarding for students, faculty and the community. Community-based learning as a teaching strategy is time consuming and faculty flexibility is important for creating a successful course. The rewards, however, outweigh the time spent creating and implementing the courses. The faculty members gained a valuable understanding of what to do and not to do when engaging students in community-based learning, working with local agencies, and fundraising.

Different strategies were used in the fall and spring semesters for coordinating the students’ visits the shelter to volunteer and conduct their interview. It became apparent that time management and planning is extraordinarily important. For example, in the fall semester, students were given a list of available times and were instructed to show up during one of those times. This strategy was an attempt to give the students flexibility. However, it backfired because many students put off their volunteering assignments until the last minute and the shelters became overwhelmed with students. The second semester students were required to commit to a day and time in the first week of class. Although scheduling may seem like a minor component of the class, it became one of the most crucial aspects of this study to coordinate. Planning and holding students accountable for being where they say they will be are critical components of engaging students in community-based learning. Scheduling times and dates early in the semester made the project run much more smoothly in the spring semester and was more respectful of the needs of the shelters.

The most noteworthy limitation of this study is that it is not likely generalizable. We were fortunate that we had an organization willing to work with us and that the individuals living in the shelter were also willing to participate. The circumstances and needs of this community may be different than the needs in other places. The different cohorts of students each year may change the outcome or the way we structure

the course. This same study conducted a year from now may not yield the same results.

Lasting impacts

The work we are doing in the homeless community, informed by the student's surveys conducted in these courses, began what is now known as The Rolling Forward Project. After the need for transportation was identified, the faculty spoke with the Public Safety department at their university and arranged for 50 bikes abandoned by the students at the end of the academic year (June) to be donated to the homeless shelter. These bikes became available for the residents to borrow to ride to work, to look for a job, to go to appointments, or any other destination they wanted to go. The student interviews and subsequent Rolling Forward bike program provided the opportunity to strengthen the relationships between students, the university, and the local community.

Not only did the Rolling Forward program help homeless individuals get where they need to go, and help students gain valuable skills (qualitative methods, volunteering, fundraising), it also set the stage for future classes. Students in subsequent classes can see firsthand how public research can have tangible results. Students continue to volunteer in the shelters, but rather than volunteering wherever the shelter caseworkers place them, they are volunteering in the Rolling Forward bike office that was established in the men's shelter. Students are able to feel as if they are a part of something that is continuing to provide a much-needed service to individuals in the shelter. Along with coursework that shows them what the previous classes accomplished, they are also involved in their own fundraising and conduct follow up interviews of bike program participants.

Discussion

The courses included in this project were designed to give students an understanding of the structural influences on homelessness, give them experience with qualitative research, and help them advocate for social change. Heeding the warnings of Mooney and Edwards (2001), we were careful to integrate material to out of course experiences so that students were not merely volunteering for the sake of course credit. As shown in the students' end-of-course reflections, almost all students were able to identify and understand structural reasons for poverty and homelessness and barriers to housing. Additionally, pre-and-post tests revealed that students were less likely to feel that the homeless were

solely responsible for their own plight and that they were homeless because they were lazy or did not want to work. They were also less likely to believe that the homeless had all the resources they needed. In addition, many students in these courses reported that this had been a life-changing experience.

Students involved in the courses had the opportunity to see public sociology in action and the outcomes of this project have far exceeded our initial goals. Students gained valuable qualitative research skills and were able to link course content to the real world. The professors learned more about implementing community-based learning in the classroom, and the project has created valuable linkages between the shelters, the students, the university, and the community. Rather than having their stereotypes validated, many students became inspired to continue to work in the homeless community. Many students continued volunteering their time, interning, and working with the homeless long after the course was over.

The implementation of the Rolling Forward bike program means that subsequent students can see and understand how the work of previous courses has made a difference in the lives of the individuals in the shelters. Seeing the concrete results of previous students' efforts creates enthusiasm that is impossible to manufacture by the course content alone.

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ORCID

Stephanie Southworth  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1122-9399>

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Appendix A

Social Inequality/Sociology of Poverty Final Paper Rubric

Grade			
90–100%	80–89%	70–79%	60–69%
Paper describes all in and out of class work.	Paper describes most in and out of class work.	Paper describes some and out of class work.	Paper describes some and out of class work.
Student has completed all tasks assigned	Student has completed most tasks assigned	Student has completed some tasks assigned	Student has completed some tasks assigned
Student has shown up to out of course locations on time	Student has shown up to out of course locations on time	Student has shown up to out of course locations on time	Student has shown up to out of course locations on time
All out of course work is related to course texts and lectures. At least three outside sources are cited correctly.	Most out of course work is related to course texts and lectures. At least three outside sources are cited correctly.	Some of course work is related to course texts and lectures. At least two outside sources are cited correctly.	Some out of course work is related to course texts and lectures. At least two outside sources are cited correctly.
Paper demonstrates a complex understanding of social issues surrounding poverty/homelessness	Paper demonstrates a complex understanding of social issues surrounding poverty/homelessness	Paper demonstrates a basic understanding of social issues surrounding poverty/homelessness	Paper does not demonstrate much understanding of social issues surrounding poverty/homelessness
Paper identifies numerous structural causes and consequences of homelessness	Paper identifies some structural causes and consequences of homelessness	Paper identifies some structural causes and consequences of homelessness	Paper does not structural causes and consequences of homelessness
Paper does not include typos and is turned in on time	Paper has a few typos and is turned in on time	Paper has a few typos and is turned in on time	Paper has numerous typos and/or is not turned in on time
All opinions backed up by evidence. All statements have correct citations	Some opinions backed up by evidence. All statements have correct citations	Some opinions backed up by evidence. Most statements have correct citations	Opinions are not backed up by evidence.