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The Landscape of Rural Service Learning, and What it Teaches Us All

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Abstract

Community-engaged scholars know that understanding the community context is critical for successful communitybased learning that results in community development. As a rural-focused and mostly rural-based educator, I've been surprised at the lack of attention over the decades by university– community engagement scholars to the characteristics, opportunities, challenges, and impacts of rural service-learning. The Rural Alliance for Service Learning has attempted to address this gap in the literature by publishing this 19-chapter anthology of interesting experiences, research, and insights about service-learning in rural America with a predominant focus on the upper Midwest.

Disciplines

Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Rural Sociology | Secondary Education

Comments

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Review by Nancy Franz

Community-engaged scholars know that understanding the community context is critical for successful community-based learning that results in community development. As a rural-focused and mostly rural-based educator, I've been surprised at the lack of attention over the decades by university-community engagement scholars to the characteristics, opportunities, challenges, and impacts of rural service-learning. The Rural Alliance for Service Learning has attempted to address this gap in the literature by publishing this 19-chapter anthology of interesting experiences, research, and insights about service-learning in rural America with a predominant focus on the upper Midwest.

The book is divided into sections on rural service-learning context, practice, and the future. As with many publications about university-community engagement, the publication gives deep attention to practice stories and lessons learned from those experiences. This approach will appeal to service-learning practitioners looking for tips and tools for improving their work with students and communities. However, the chapters of this anthology offer a strong variety of differing institutions, disciplines, perspectives, experiences, and approaches to rural service-learning. This diversity provides valuable insights about rural life, service-learning, research on rural service-learning, and community engagement for sociologists, educators, service-learning researchers, community engagement scholars, and higher education administrators. Even though none of the authors write from a rural community perspective, community partners may find useful ideas, practices, and insights for communities interested in working with students and higher education institutions to bring about local change.

The title of the book led me to expect that each chapter would fully address the intersections of rural life, service-learning, and important insights for the future. However, some chapters fail to fully situate the case or work within the rural context or delineate the specific learning processes or outcomes for students. Chapters often provide interesting research questions or practice stories but fail to answer the "so what?" question about what we all can learn from authors' experiences. This lack of attending deeply to all three elements of the title (rural, service-learning, and what we all can learn) may stem from the lack of a consistent definition of "rural"

and “service-learning” used across the volume or the goal of providing a very comprehensive overview of the topics. However, the introductory and concluding chapters do a nice job of addressing all three aspects of the title by setting the stage for service-learning in a rural context and providing a summary and future suggestions for this work.

It might have been more appropriate to title this book *It's All About Distance: Why Rural Service Learning Is Invisible but Important for Us All*. The main theme spanning all the chapters about what makes rural service-learning unique is “distance.” Authors provide research and multiple examples of physical, cultural, and resource distance and how it deeply shapes rural service-learning. Distance is documented as negative when creating transportation challenges and a disconnect between urban and rural norms and values. On the other hand, distance is seen as beneficial when creating less formal structures and cultures to more quickly, efficiently, and fully engage with service partners and beneficiaries. Faculty, students, and community partners must serve as boundary spanners between rural life and urban institutions for successful service-learning outcomes. In fact, the authors believe rural service-learning can have greater impact than service-learning in urban areas due to unique characteristics of rural life.

The authors provide a comprehensive variety of lists and tools for successful service-learning, including specific characteristics unique to rural life; six service-learning principles and questions to be addressed with community partners; detailed processes for creating, implementing, and evaluating rural service-learning projects; guidelines for one successful rural service-learning project; a list of rural service-learning best practices related to geography, faculty, and students; and a list of considerations and cases related to reducing risk in rural service-learning. My favorite tool describes how to enhance rural service-learning using the Medicine Wheel to integrate Native American culture into project planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection. Several authors also provide lists of significant questions to be explored by future research.

Most importantly, this book builds on previous literature and practice by suggesting that rural service-learning could inform an improved model for service-learning more broadly—one that provides a balance between learning and community development. The authors believe practitioners (and I also suggest researchers) need to reexamine the ways they work with communities to create approaches adapted specifically to fit rural or urban cultures, rather than assuming that one approach works across contexts. They sug-

gest that rural service-learning, to be successful, must be primarily focused on community gain with student service as a method rather than the primary outcome. Success will be more evident for those focused on building trust and relationships with rural communities through individuals and networks, rather than through formal agencies and organizations found more often in the urban context.

This volume is a welcome and much needed addition to the book series *Transformations in Higher Education: The Scholarship of Engagement* sponsored by the National Collaborative for the Study of University Engagement at Michigan State University. It clearly articulates the joys and challenges of rural service-learning, adds to previous research and best practices about service-learning, and provides a suite of promising practices and further research questions that will continue to help service-learning improve community life. Urban-located service-learning researchers and practitioners should also look to rural colleges for best practices for working with rural communities rather than working in, at, or for rural communities.

I challenge the authors of this book and others who value service-learning to continue to articulate why rural service-learning is important to everyone, not just the institutions and communities it serves. I'd like to see the title of this book become a strong reality—that we all learn from rural service-learning to make life better for everyone.

About the Reviewer

Nancy Franz is a professor emeritus in the School of Education at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. She has written and presented widely on community-engaged scholarship and Cooperative Extension. She received her Ph.D. from Cornell University.

