Preparing Students to Make a Difference: Community Asset Mapping as a Vehicle for Involving Students in Community Action

Deborah Smith
Southern Connecticut State University

Abstract

This article describes the development of a new graduate course entitled Recreation and Community that was created for the purpose of 1) providing students with an understanding of the role of recreation and leisure services as a social tool in building community, 2) building student appreciation of the processes involved in community development from the perspective of mobilizing resources and organizing community change, and 3) acquainting students with the tools needed to facilitate that process. The article also introduces community asset mapping and systems theory as both community development tools and pedagogical vehicles for integrating community activities and course learning. In this course students applied principles of community development and community organizing to produce a community asset map and recreation action plan for the Southern Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone (SIDEZ). Students used systems theory as the organizing theoretical framework for the course. This article describes the steps that were involved in project identification, collaboration agreement, course development, and project implementation. It also provides in-depth discussion of what community asset mapping is, how it is done, and how systems theory principles can be applied to the analysis of community asset map data.

Keywords: community asset mapping, systems theory, academic service learning, community development, capacity-focused development, institutional citizenship, social responsibility

Biographical Information

Deborah Smith is an Associate Professor in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Southern Connecticut State University.

Introduction

Recently, there has been attention directed to the civic responsibility of higher education (Astin, 1998). The mission of universities should be to model institutional citizenship and assume an active role in fostering strong civic organization, promoting community renewal, and partnering with community to solve problems. Consequently,

there is increased focus on initiatives to reinvent the research university for public service (Chechoway, 1997), to engage universities and colleges in public problem solving (Griener, 1997), to form new social partnerships (Brascamp & Wergin, 1996), and to use community-based projects to help scholars build public support (Cordes, 1998).

Parallel to these discussions about higher education as a whole and the role it should play in civic engagement, there has been discussion in the recreation and leisure services literature about the role our academic discipline should play in practicing institutional citizenship and promoting social change (Anderson, Schleien, & Green, 1993; Dahl, 1992; Farris, 1992; Goodale, 1992; Henderson & Bedini, 1989; Jenson, 1998; Kivel & Yaffe, 1999; O'Hanlon, 1992; Stewart & Vogt, 1992; Young, 1992). Recreation and leisure service professionals understand the unique contribution recreation can make as a change agent because of its potential to be used as both a social and economic tool for addressing community needs.

What can recreation and leisure service professionals do from a pedagogical perspective to inculcate social responsibility in students and involve them in civic life? Academic service learning is one potential solution. It is in its broadest sense civic education, a way to connect students to community and extend learning into the civic arena. It is viewed as a "pedagogy for citizenship" (Medel-Reyes, 1998), a "pedagogy of action and reflection" (Rhoades & Howard, 1998), and a way to promote community renewal through civic literacy (Parsons & Lisman, 1996).

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will describe the development of a new graduate course entitled Recreation and Community that was created as a response to expressed student interest in community activism. Second, it will introduce community asset mapping and systems theory as both community development tools and pedagogical vehicles for integrating community activities and course learning. The intent of the course was 1) to provide students with an understanding of the role of recreation as a social tool in building community, 2) to build student appreciation of the processes involved in community development from the perspective of mobilizing resources and organizing community change, and 3) to acquaint students with the tools needed to facilitate that process.

This course is unique because it was created around a community-based collaborative initiative between the Health Education and Recreation Department at Southern Illinois University and the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone (SIDEZ). This initiative was financed with an Illinois Campus Compact Community Engagement grant. Campus Compact is federally funded by a Learn and Serve America Higher Education grant, the intent of which is to establish service learning and community engagement as part of the curriculum and culture of colleges and universities. Grants are intended to support collaborations between institutions of higher education and local communities where projects are identified, designed, and implemented collaboratively; students are involved in the project completion; and there is a demonstrated community

need. Teachers can create the opportunity to not only place students in a community context where they can observe community problems and issues, but also have students engage in applied research activities that contribute to problem solutions. Four grant objectives for this project were drawn up collaboratively between the faculty member who created this course and SIDEZ representatives. These objectives were the following: 1) to have both students and SIDEZ citizenry work together to develop a community asset map of the SIDEZ area, 2) to have students use the asset map as a basis for developing and formally presenting an action plan for developing recreation resources at a SIDEZ community forum, 3) to incubate new resident involvement through the project process, and 4) to have recreation initiatives continue after this specific project was completed.

Project Development ,

Initial efforts on this project began the fall of 1999 when the faculty member was given the task of creating the Recreation and Community course, and went in search of a community-based project around which to shape the course content. It was felt that the only way students could build real understanding of community dynamics was to be situated in community, and the only way students could build real understanding of community development was to be involved with doing it. This course additionally provided the faculty member with the opportunity to establish a new connection between the Health Education and Recreation Department and a community-based agency and in doing so, lay the foundation for a teaching, service, and research dynamic that would hopefully continue after the course was over.

Several sources directed the faculty member to the Executive Director of SIDEZ in February 2000 to discuss the possibility of a collaboration between the Recreation and Community class students and SIDEZ. The Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone is one of only eight rural empowerment zones in the United States. It encompasses portions of three counties that are located in the southernmost tip of Illinois about four hundred miles south of Chicago at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. These counties comprise the most impoverished part of the state and are plagued with a stagnant economy, increasing out-migration, high unemployment, a paucity of amenities and social services, and considerable poverty.

A series of discussions and meetings took place throughout the spring of 2000 that laid the foundation for the collaboration effort. A public forum soliciting input from SIDEZ residents was held in June at which time a recreation subcommittee was formed and the grant objectives established. It was intended that the members of this subcommittee work in tandem with the recreation students, act as gatekeepers to the communities, help in the identification of human and physical resources, and aid in the facilitation of interviews and focus groups.

Course Development and Implementation

The focus of teaching efforts in the Recreation and Community course was to provide students with the tools that they would need to accomplish the community project. In the first five weeks of the semester students were 1) given an overview of how recreation and leisure services could be used as a social tool, 2) introduced to the challenges of providing recreation services in rural communities, and 3) instructed in the components of asset mapping. Students traveled down to the Empowerment Zone to meet with the SIDEZ Recreation subcommittee and attended a public recreation forum where citizens shared their perceptions of issues related to recreation provision in the SIDEZ area. Students were also introduced to systems theory which was used as the organizing theoretical framework for the course.

Starting in October, students in the class were divided into three teams. Each team was assigned one of the three counties that comprise the Empowerment Zone. The task of each team was to work in conjunction with assigned Recreation subcommittee members on an asset map of recreation resources in that county. Time was required to develop relationships with residents. By the end of November students had attended local meetings, participated in local activities, conducted focus groups and personal interviews, and distributed an information gathering card to local citizens. Course readings and content operated in parallel to these activities and were directed at helping students build their understanding of community organizing; the steps involved in organizing community change; the challenges of developing community capacity; the role of recreation in building social infrastructure; and issues related to the implementation, mobilization, and development of resources in a rural setting with particular attention to recreation issues. Students were also provided with instruction on how to organize and facilitate local meetings and focus groups, conduct in-depth interviews, keep a field log, and manage and organize a large amount of information.

Data gathering was brought to a close at the end of November. Students then finalized asset maps and developed recommendations that they felt would help the Empowerment Zone in its effort to cultivate recreation resources as well as use recreation as a tool to strengthen community linkages. An invitation was sent out to an extensive mailing list of Empowerment Zone residents inviting them to attend a December public hearing that featured a formal presentation by the students of their recreation action plan recommendations.

Community Asset Mapping

Community asset mapping is a planning process pioneered by John McKnight at Northwestern University as a response to traditional needs assessment processes. According to Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) traditional needs assessments function as deficit inventories focused on a community's deficiencies, weaknesses, and problems. The result of a need-based approach to community development is frequently deficiency-

oriented policies; need-based funding allocation criteria which inhibit incentives for productivity; and the creation of client neighborhoods where dependency is encouraged, and residents become consumers of services that can only be provided by outsiders (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993: O'Looney, 1996). Additionally, exclusive use of need-based decision making and resource allocation, without a corresponding understanding of a community's strengths and capacity for self-help, can result in ineffective and wasteful use of program resources (O'Looney, 1996).

An asset perspective calls for a strength-concentrated assessment and inventory that is driven by the intent of capacity-focused development. Capacity-focused development is a strategy that emphasizes policies and activities directed at the cultivation of social and economic resources that are contained within a community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; O'Looney, 1996). There are two main reasons for a capacity-focused development strategy. First, significant community development is most likely to be accomplished when local community people have the willingness and the commitment to invest in themselves and their resources (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). This does not preclude outside assistance being provided to communities that are actively involved in their own development (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996; Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993). The second reason for emphasizing a place-based, capacity development strategy is that in most cases, the prospect for significant outside help and development for impoverished communities in the form of either new amounts of federal dollars, or new large scale job providing industries, is bleak. (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Community asset mapping is premised on the belief that effective community development efforts start with an understanding of a community's assets, capacities, and abilities; with individuals, citizen associations, and local institutions being the key resources for community regeneration (McKnight & Kretzmasnn, 1996; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Community revitalization from an asset perspective begins with an inventory of all available local assets that can then be used as a basis for developing and maximizing the value of these resources by "connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 4). Once the community asset mapping process is completed, assets can be examined for the purpose of identifying and building the support structures for self-help and mutual aid that underlie a community's informal economy (O'Looney, 1996); in other words, its social infrastructure. Building positive, productive, and hopefully mutually beneficial relationships between individuals, associations, organizations, and institutions is the central component of the asset-based development process (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The steps involved in completing an asset map include the following: specifying the purpose of the asset map and the project focus area, identifying who will be responsible for the mapping process, designing the inventory, determining the inventory methodology, training and supervising the interviewers, organizing the collected information, and developing a management system for the information as it changes or is revised (Kretzmann, McKnight, Moore, & Puntenney, 1999; Kretzmann, McKnight, & Puntenney,

1998; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996; Turner, McKnight, & Kretzmann, 1999).

Students in the Recreation class had two main objectives that needed to be accomplished in the period of time allocated for compiling community data. The first task was to work in conjunction with SIDEZ local citizens to create an inventory of existing assets in the SIDEZ area. The second task was to gather additional information necessary for the development of a recreation action plan for the region.

Students and SIDEZ volunteers compiled the asset mapping data through the use of public sources such as phone books and newspapers, interviews with key community people and residents, information gathering cards distributed to local citizenry, and observation. The first category inventoried was that of individuals. The collective skills, talents, knowledge, and experience of individuals in a community form a tremendous reservoir of assets few of which are usually mobilized for community development purposes (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996). Key people in the SIDEZ area were identified, contact information was secured, and when possible, potential contributions these people could make were noted. Students defined key people as those who are influential, prominent, and well informed. Students and SIDEZ workers also inventoried individual community people who had skills and abilities that could be used in any aspect of the planning, development, implementation, or staffing of recreation programs and/or services. When possible skills and abilities for each of these individuals were noted, and contact information was secured.

The second category of assets inventoried was that of organizations and associations. These groups include such things as service clubs, church groups, business organizations, youth groups, and sport leagues. These informal and primarily volunteer driven collectives are not only an important part of the existing associational context of a community, but are also an important tool for community development when membership efforts are broadened beyond association purpose and benefit, and connected with other associations, businesses and institutions for collective, and community-building activities (Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993). Local associations and organizations, especially those that are informally constituted, can be hard to identify and locate. Students and SIDEZ volunteers did the best that they could to identify and secure contact information, identify activities engaged in by members of these associations and additional kinds of activities that they would be willing to take on.

The third category of assets inventoried was that of the more formal institutions which are located in the SIDEZ region. These included private businesses; public institutions such as schools, libraries, and police stations; and nonprofit organizations such as social service agencies, and higher education institutions. Formal institutions are the most visible assets of a community and an essential component of success in the community development process (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Formal institutions were identified, contact information was secured, and where possible, community contributions that the institution would be willing to offer were noted.

The final category of assets inventoried was that of physical resources in the SIDEZ region that have the potential to accommodate recreation activity. These physical resources included such things as buildings with meeting rooms, schools, gymnasiums, ball fields, outdoor recreation areas, and vacant lands and structures that could be rehabilitated for recreation purposes.

Students used focus groups and interviews with community people to gather additional information for recreation action plan development. Questions centered around the following topics: (1) recreation activities and programs that people would like to see available in their communities; (2) problems and issues impacting the delivery of recreation programs and services; (3) relationships that exist between and among local residents, local associations, and local institutions with particular attention to recreation provision; (4) the identification of deficiencies in local resident/association/institution linkages and relationships; and (5) citizen ideas for partnering and relationship building with particular attention to recreation provision.

Systems Theory as the Framework for Community Analysis

Social workers have been using systems theory as a way of conceptualizing their approach to human services since the early 1960s, because it provides them with the option of explaining structure and function across both micro and macro levels (Assarto, 1994). Vosler and Nair (1993) indicated that in a systems conceptualization, "individuals grow and live within family systems, reside within neighborhoods and community systems, and live and work within groups and organizations in a locality...which is embedded in the social structures of a state, province and /or nation" (p. 161). Individuals and social systems are recognized to be interdependent and dynamic (Vosler & Nair, 1993). Vosler and Nair (1993) explained that at each system level, patterns emerge regarding who participates and how, who has access to what resources, what values are important, and how change (if any) can be effected" (p.161).

When one applies systems theory to a discussion of community, communities are viewed as geographic localities comprised of loosely coupled or linked systems that include many other systems, and have extensive ties or networks of linkages existing among the various types of associational contexts and systems contained both within and external to the community environment (Warren, 1972; Martin & O'Connor, 1989). Defined as such, communities can also be analyzed from a systems perspective. If communities are viewed as linkage networks, an examination of linkage relationships in a community can be used to diagnose community strengths and problems and be used as a basis for identifying solution strategies (Martin & O'Connor, 1989). The assumption is that communities benefit from the development of more (intensive) and different (extensive) linkages between individuals and organizations. This theoretical framework is very compatible with the tenets of asset-based community development. If a community development process is asset-based and focused on not only the mobilization of resources within the community but also the multiplication of their power and effectiveness, then

linkage development is a critical strategy. Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) indicated that "one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to build and rebuild the relationship between and among local residents, local associations, and local institutions" (p. 9).

Concepts that are important to consider when analyzing community linkages from a systems perspective include: 1) the relative strength of linkages (the degree to which linkages are interdependent); 2) linkage boundaries (whether linkages are contained within one community or span community boundaries to form external linkages); and 3) where power emanates from and how power is exercised in the linkage relationship (vertical-down, vertical-up, or horizontal) (Martin & O'Connor, 1989). When one begins to map out ideas for generating linkages and relationships between assets in a community, it needs to be recognized that some assets are more readily available and accessible for community building than others (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996). The most easily accessible assets are those located and controlled within the community such as sport leagues; individual businesses which can provide financial resources; and religious organizations which can provide community leadership, volunteers, and church properties for recreational activities (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996). The next most accessible assets are those that are located in the community but controlled by an outside source such as regional schools which can be a focus for youth and community programs and services, and social service agencies which provide access to populations that could be targeted for recreation programs (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996). The least accessible assets are those that are both located and controlled outside the community such as state and federal parks and funding sources, and public information which is a primary resource for communicating to residents in a community about recreation opportunities (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996).

Students in the Community and Recreation course used both the conceptual framework of systems theory and the SIDEZ asset map inventory as the basis for developing their action plan recommendations. Once the SIDEZ assets map inventory was completed, students examined the data for existing assets that had been unidentified or underutilized for recreation purposes. They also examined assets for potential linkages and relationship development.

SIDEZ is a rural area characterized by small communities that have had relatively little to do with one another. These communities and the three counties that comprise SIDEZ are now unified under the Empowerment Zone designation; however, there is much to be done in terms of looking at capacity from a regional perspective. Students focused their examination on vertical and horizontal linkages within communities, between communities in each county, and finally, between the three counties that comprise SIDEZ. They used the problems and issues related to recreation delivery that were identified by residents, as well as recreation opportunities that residents indicated they would like to see developed in SIDEZ as the basis for their examination. Students then looked for ways to bring individuals, associations, and institutions together so that impediments

to recreation provision could be mediated, and desired recreation programs and services developed.

Outcomes of Collaborative Initiative

A major pedagogical issue related to educating for social responsibility is that of measurement. What do we mean by social responsibility? What objectives can be developed for teaching it? And how do we evaluate the outcome (Goodale, 1992)? Academic service learning has been a response to this question because student involvement in community service and advocacy related activities can be demonstrated, and teaching objectives related to that involvement can be measured. The recreation and community course outlined in this paper is an example of how "pedagogy for citizenship" can be operationalized in a community setting, and how community development tools such as community asset mapping can be used to both demonstrate student contribution to the community problem solving process and facilitate student learning.

Four objectives were developed for this community-based collaborative initiative (see page 41). All objectives were achieved and all generated project products that demonstrated student community development contributions. Objective One: students and SIDEZ citizens worked collaboratively to produce a community asset map of the SIDEZ area. Objective Two: students developed recreation action plan recommendations that were presented orally to SIDEZ citizens and board members, and submitted in written report form to SIDEZ. Objective Three: new resident involvement was achieved through participation in student facilitated recreation forums, focus groups, and asset inventory data collection. Objective Four: new recreation initiatives resulted from this collaborative project including the securement of a $20,000 grant to fund summer recreation programs in the Empowerment Zone (this grant is now in its second year of renewal), the distribution of a summer recreation calendar outlining all SIDEZ recreation activities to every household in SIDEZ, and the employment of a recreation graduate assistant to spearhead continued recreation resource development.

Pedagogically, the Recreation and Community Course was organized around three main objectives (see page 40). The community asset mapping project was an integral part of achieving those objectives. Objective One: community asset mapping and analysis provided students with an understanding of the role of recreation as a social tool in building community. Through this project students considered how to build social networks and increase citizen linkage; facilitated the coming together of citizens from diverse backgrounds to address community problems related to recreation provision; examined possibilities for cultivating a recreation service delivery network; and developed strategies for linking citizens to existing recreation resources. Objective Two: the responsibility of conducting a community assets inventory gave students first hand experience with the initial steps of community organizing especially as it relates to community analysis and resource mobilization. Objective Three: community asset mapping familiarized students with important tools of community action including the building of

relationships with local people; and data gathering techniques that included developing interview guides, conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups, and managing and organizing a large amount of information.

Conclusion

This article describes a course entitled Recreation and Community that was created to provide students with an understanding of the role of recreation in community development, to build in students an appreciation of the processes involved in community development especially as it relates to mobilizing resources and organizing community change, and to teach students the tools needed to facilitate the development process. The design of this course incorporated many of the suggestions from the recreation literature for teaching and prompting social responsibility in our students. Students were provided with an opportunity for community involvement through a class project, students were taught tools of community engagement through course content, and students were provided models of community activism in the behaviors of the SIDEZ citizens who donated of themselves to attend recreation forums, to be interviewed, to participate in focus groups, or to help distribute information gathering cards. An additional dimension of "pedagogy for citizenship" was incorporated into this course when integrated learning was expanded from teaching-service components to that of teaching, service, and community problem solving activities through the community asset mapping project.

It is an exciting course design. First, it reflects the spirit of institutional citizenship with a recreation academic unit assuming an active role in public problem solving. Second, through the development of an academic service learning experience that has measurable goals and products, the civic education and community engagement that one is attempting to accomplish through teaching is formalized. Third, a teaching, service community problem solving dynamic that is established through a collaboration such as the one described in this paper can be iterative with teaching, service, and community problem solving continuing and perpetuating after the course is over. Finally, for those of us in the helping professions, institutional citizenship and the strong connections between teaching, service, and community engagement that it helps to foster, provides a strong statement not only about what we value as a profession, but what we value as a teacher.

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