

From the Heart: Learning about the Working Poor and the Living Wage

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Abstract

Since 2008, classroom learning activities on the working poor and the living wage have been included in an introductory core course that focuses on community services and professions in the School of Community Resources and Development at Arizona State University. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2008 that 8.9 million people were classified as the working poor, about one-third of them service workers. This has implications for the leisure delivery system, which uses many services workers as base employees and knowledge of this subject is important to future professionals. Students have been required to qualitatively interview and report on a person they believed to be among the working poor. Initial reaction to the assignment was one of reluctance, but the exercise has had significant impact on the students, changed their attitudes about the working poor, and developed a sense of respect for those they may one day supervise.

KEYWORDS: *Classroom learning activity, working poor, living wage*

Introduction

The focus for the course “Community Services and Professions” at Arizona State University has been to provide students with both a macro-understanding of the leisure delivery system as well as a micro understanding of the multiple organizations that comprise the system, their goals, the leisure service concepts they employ, and the

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employment perspectives and existing job opportunities. A major goal of the course has been to have students in the School of Community Resources and Development begin to narrow their personal career directions in the management fields of parks and recreation, tourism development, and nonprofit leadership. The text for this class has been *Introduction to Leisure Services: Career Perspectives* by Kraus, Barber, and Shapiro (2001).

The information offered in this text has proven to be an excellent resource to achieve the course objectives of having students develop an appreciation for the role of leisure organizations in society as they become familiar with their basic missions, challenges, and the opportunities faced by today's recreation, nonprofit, and tourism professionals. Ideas this text have not addressed, however, are the concepts of the working poor and the living wage as they relate to several people employed in the leisure delivery system. Beginning in the spring of 2008, this subject began to be included as part of the course and had an immediate significant impact on student attitudes.

The Working Poor and Living Wages

The U.S. Census Bureau in 2008 estimated that over 13% of the nation's population, just under 40 million people, were living at or below the official poverty level, and about 8.9 million adults were classified as the working poor. These individuals were defined as those who had spent at least 27 weeks either working or looking for work but had incomes below the official poverty level. The ratio of the working poor in the labor force compared to all individuals in the labor force was 6.0%. Since 1987, this percentage has peaked at 6.7% in 1993 and was as low as 4.7% in 2000. Also in data reported from 2008:

- Hispanics and Blacks were twice as likely as Whites and Asians to be among the working poor.
- Only 1.7% of college graduates compared to 18.3% of those with less than a high school degree were considered the working poor.
- An equal number of men and women were at the poverty level, but the working poor rate for women was 9% higher than for men; women who maintained families were more than twice as likely as males to be included in the working poor.
- Young people were more likely than older people to be the working poor.
- Although many people classified as the working poor are part-time, a sizeable group of full-time workers, 4.1 million, 3.6%, are in this group.

Of great importance to the leisure delivery system was data that the likelihood of being classified as the working poor varied widely by occupation. In 2008, 12.1% of service workers, nearly one-third of the total in poverty, were working poor. The base of the leisure delivery system is made up of service workers, usually consisting of the lowest paid staff (LPS), including janitors, maids, park maintenance workers, clerks, recreation aides, and numerous other positions. Additionally, it is equally important to remember that the working poor are also the clients and participants of the leisure delivery system.

The living wage is a concept closely related to that of the working poor. A simple definition is that a living wage is sufficient to provide a minimally satisfactory living condition that includes housing, food, and basic living expenses. Although there is a federal minimum wage many states have a higher minimum wage standard and some communities as well as organizations recognize that even a higher amount is required to provide a living wage. The Washington based Economic Policy Institute directs the basic standards for what a living wage consists of and there are several living wage calculators available with two of the most prominent being provided by Glasmeier at Pennsylvania State University and Pearce at the University of Washington. These sources have easily accessible web sites that have been used to enhance classroom lectures and discussions.

To introduce students to “real” working poor people *Harvard Works Because We Do* (Halpern, 2003) has been used to provide deep qualitative contextual examples. This text provides dozens of photographs and interviews with the university’s LPS. Students have responded very favorably to this book, in part because the text also details the student organized living wage movement, that included the occupation of the Harvard University president’s office for several days as part of the protest in the late 1990s. Although not required, it has been suggested to students if they are interested in additional information that they examine Studs Terkel’s *Working* (1974).

The Learning Activity

During the semester, students are required to interview a leisure delivery system employee of their own choosing who they suspect might be considered as a member of the working poor and earn less than or equal to the living wage. They are encouraged to interview a person who is working in their selected career path of parks and recreation, tourism, or nonprofit management. The immediate goal is to get to know this employee as a person while discovering what the life of an LPS is like and how this might be similar or different to their own life. Students are not allowed to interview family, friends, or fellow students. They are instructed to inform the person they choose that they have been assigned to interview a leisure delivery system service worker and not to mention the concept of the working poor or directly ask about salaries, although this information has often been volunteered by their subjects. Other than this, the format of the interview has been purposefully left vague to encourage students to let the interviews flow and become more of a conversation. The recommended time of the interview has been 20 to 30 minutes, although it has been mentioned that the time frame was sometimes exceeded.

Students have been required to give an in-class verbal presentation about their selected subject person and provide a digital photo shown as part of their presentations. With over 200 presentations made to date, very few have been similar. A few have been shallow and provided few details, but most were in depth and demonstrated an amazing amount of passion and empathy. Often, those students who had the greatest trepidation when the project was assigned produced the highest quality presentations. A research paper on their selected subject person has also required as part of the project.

As each student makes their presentation, other students are required to prepare a short, anonymous peer review that has been passed immediately to the speakers upon

the completion of their presentations providing instant feedback on their efforts (these have not been reviewed by the instructor). This research project has been evaluated as 25% of the overall total grade for the course.

Conclusions

Some students have embraced the project immediately, but most were nervous, reluctant, and had to be encouraged and coached to complete the assignment. They have interviewed hotel maids, parks maintenance staff, janitors, theater concessioners, pool cleaners, lifeguards, t-shirt security guards, waitresses, front desk clerks, umpires, cooks, rangers, pet groomers, vendors, and a multitude of other LPS. More than half of those interviewed have been women and minorities with the average age in the mid-30s. Course evaluations have included comments from students on how they have responded very favorably to this learning activity, and maybe more importantly, how they felt it made a difference in their lives. A few of the comments discovered in student papers have included:

I thought he had a very positive attitude ... seemed to genuinely love helping people ... I hope that sometime in the future he will find that higher paying job he deserves.

I learned he is a hard working man that cares deeply about his family. I now understand that people who do the "dirty jobs" in the tourism industry are not lazy or less motivated than everyone else.

What was so great right off the bat was her excitement that I wanted to interview HER for a school project. She was ecstatic that someone cared so much to pick her and that made me feel good.

At first I was extremely nervous about completing this assignment; however I ended up being thankful for my experience. Although I only spoke to Roselyn for about 20 minutes, I took a lot away from the interview. I realized Roselyn was not an unintelligent or lazy person. She was simply born into the cycle of poverty, and as is the case with most of the working poor, is having a hard time making her way out.

I thought I was well aware of the different income levels of people in my community, but this assignment has opened my eyes.

I met Sue, a park ranger, and I was immediately intrigued by her enthusiasm and love for the park. After hearing about massive closure of several state parks, I contacted Sue and asked if her park was one of those affected. To my disappointment, I found out it was one of the parks that closed. This left a great Arizona State Park closed, and now leaves ranger Sue without a job.

The hope is that when these students become the future managers, supervisors, and administrators in the leisure delivery system, the LPS will not be invisible, that their work will be valued, and they will be respected for who they are as individuals. This learning activity has been something that students never expected to study and not a subject matter most were even aware of prior to enrolling in the course. Upon seeing former students around the university, at conferences, and in the work place, it has not been unusual for the working poor and living wages project to be brought forward as a special memory of the class.

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