

Civic Engagement in Sociology: The ENLACE Undergraduate Research and Mentorship Program at UCSB

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In my presentation today I will discuss an academic service learning project in progress at UCSB that I am doing within my department, Sociology. According to Dick Flacks and Gregg Thomson's UCUES study, 70-85 percent of seniors highly value the opportunity to be engaged with faculty research and/or classes that improve understanding of national and world events and where they can conduct research as part of the class. Sociology – or rather “public sociology,” according to Berkeley Professor Michael Buroway can provide such opportunities within the aegis of an academic curriculum. Given the strong desire of many students for civic engagement and also for direct research experiences and given my commitment and that of many faculty in my department to develop a “public sociology” agenda and curriculum, I am crafting a series of undergraduate academic learning courses which I plan to submit to our curriculum committee this coming academic year. Today I will discuss this program – or at least sketch it out given the shortness of time – and the value students have for this particular learning experience.

According to Michael Buroway, public sociology is “a sociology that seeks to bring sociology to publics beyond the academy, promoting dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values that we adhere under a microscope” (2003:1). Buroway indicates that there are two types of public sociology: traditional (that works through the national media) and grassroots or “organic” (that engages diverse publics directly). Public sociology is distinct from, but has a dynamic connection to

professional, critical, and policy sociologies. He argues this mission is consistent with the origins of U.S. sociology, which was dedicated to moral reform and social justice (2003). Many of our students are interested in learning how to contribute to the public good and participate in social change to address some of the pressing issues of our society.

One area in need of significant intervention and social change is the crisis in Latino education. Locally and statewide, fewer than 60 percent of Latino students graduate from high school and over half (57 percent) of all Latinos, 25 years and older do not have high school diplomas compared to 11.3 percent of Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002). Only 11 percent of Latinos have college diplomas compared to 29 percent of Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002)¹. About **14** percent of UC undergraduates are Latino although over half of the public school population is Latino (Flacks, Thomson, Douglass and Caspara 2004). Many Latino students who have made it to the UC as well as many non-Latino students at UC want to “do something” about this situation. Many campuses have documented the numerous volunteer activities of students who work for various community enhancement causes. I have seen some of this at my own campus.

At UCSB I've been part of a team that secured a W.K Kellogg Foundation 4-year “ENLACE” grant to develop a partnership between UCSB, local community colleges, K-12 schools, and Latino-focused community-based organizations in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties to implement a set of pilot projects to strengthen the academic preparation and educational attachment of Latinos in elementary, middle, high schools and college. This program had matching funds from UCSB and in-kind funds from Ventura College and Oxnard College. Because the educational pipeline extends beyond K-12, this educational model includes strategies to enhance the academic engagement of Latino undergraduates through a community service/public research model which is

one type of academic service learning. My goal is to enact a critical educational praxis both among undergraduates as well as the university. In my mind, critical pedagogy is integral to academic service learning and civic engagement at the UC.

So what IS this program? The Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program is a 4-quarter research and service experience in the local community. Each Spring, between 25-30 UCSB students take a special topics field research class, Sociology 194 or the field research class, Education 124 to gain basic skills in this methodology alongside of readings in education. After this class, they are assigned as mentors and researchers to local Latino students and their families. In Fall, they take Sociology 146, "Education and Empowerment" where they concurrently do mentorship, tutoring, and advocacy work with the students and families, document their work, and write up a research paper centered on a case study that they turn in at the end of the quarter (See Appendix).

Conceptually I am guided by a pedagogy of engagement model discussed by Raymond Padilla (2003) and others to reshape education to validate the community orientation of students, particularly those from racial-ethnic minorities, including Latinos. Integral to this model is the development of advocacy skills within the academic curriculum. A research and mentorship program anchored in community advocacy to empower local parents and students is one avenue to implement a pedagogy of engagement.

From the first day of class, I emphasize to the undergraduate mentor/researchers the importance of their backgrounds and experiences but within a reflexive sociological framework. That is, they are trained to undertake a structural analysis that unpacks personal experiences to develop larger social connections as well as more local

connections with families and students. Mentors learn to build on their own culturally gendered ways of being and knowing to develop meaningful relationships and strategies to serve as effective role models for local Latino students. This goal intersects with research on the importance of individualized attention and role models from the same (or intersecting) race-ethnic, gender, class backgrounds and/or sexual orientations to positively impact the educational motivation and achievement of elementary and secondary school-age students (Gándara and Gibson 2004). Concurrently being a role model enhances the self-esteem of an individual and contributes positively to his/her investment in the nuances and responsibilities of this role and strengthens the academic engagement of undergraduate students to the university.

The following 2 quarters, the program follows a basic internship model where the students work with the students and families and get a small stipend. However, they continue to document their work in the form of field notes which they hand in weekly. They meet with the ENLACE staff and myself every three weeks to reflect on their experiences and receive support for their advocacy work and field work. They work with two bilingual Latina/o graduate students and faculty while contributing to the improvement of educational outcomes among local minority youth.

The ENLACE research and mentorship program affirms research that demonstrates the high value of community work or involvement for many minority students that, if linked to the educational curriculum, can decrease their alienation from the “chilly climate” of many college campuses as well as enhance their academic engagement (Padilla 2003). In fact, one of the major findings of ENLACE is how the mentors value the way this program helps connect them with “their” community by moving them out of the “little bubble” in which they find themselves at the UC:

My first quarter here I was just getting adjusted so I was not as involved with community service or anything like that and I just felt like something was lacking...being at the university I feel like it's a little bubble. So, being out there and going into the families' home and helping out these kids that have problems that I have overcome—I feel like I am able to give back and also learn—learn in order to make sure that that is the career I want to go into.

The importance students attach to “give back” to students academic survival skills they learned experientially is a strong motivator that, if developed further, can positively impact their university education and deepen their preparation for their own future careers. Many mentors indicated that feeling connected to the community helped them to focus more on their university coursework.

Some people say, ‘I don't have time to give to community service’... and stuff. Um...because they're doing, like all the readings and stuff ,and ...I don't know, to me it's easier to do well in classes when you have this background `cause you're like...well I mean this is the case in sociology...I'm able to be out there and put to use what I'm learning...”

Both mentors point to a sentiment shared by nearly all of the students that some of the alienating aspects of the university can be productively addressed by working in a meaningful or helpful way in the local community resonated throughout the undergraduates and was one of the major reasons they sought to enter the ENLACE Research and Mentorship program

This year's undergraduate researcher/mentors are working with local students (called ENLACE scholars) who are in the 9th grade. Since this is a longitudinal research study, most of these students have been with ENLACE since they were in the 6th grade.² Each scholar and his or her family have one (occasionally two) undergraduate mentors. Nearly all of the undergraduate research/mentors (95%) have family, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds similar to those of our targeted families. In addition, I have had several non-Latino undergraduate mentors who were interested in enhancing their bilingual and bicultural literacy skills to be more effective K-12 teachers.

Researchers/Mentors document every activity they do with their mentees and the families. Mentors help the students develop study skills and engage in academic planning and goal setting. They also help parents navigate the educational system while connecting them with community resources. Many mentors also interface with students and teachers in the classroom and assist with on-site after-school activities, all of which are documented in field notes. Other students and graduate students (who are working on their M.A.s) are working at the school sites with the ENLACE families documenting weak and strong links in the educational pipeline in our local setting to uncover social processes potentially useful to developing strategies and policy to strengthen the academic pipeline. The local schools, families and several community based organizations (e.g., Future Leaders of America, League of United Latin American Citizens, and Casa de la Raza) work closely with UCSB to make this program work.

During the four years ENLACE has been operating, I have worked with about 110 undergraduates. All of them who were seniors successfully graduated from UCSB, and most have gone on to either secure a teaching credential and/or pursue graduate study. This program represents one successful retention strategy but most importantly, it enhances the pool of underrepresented students who will continue on to teacher education and other graduate and professional programs. Given that the Kellogg funding is now ending, my next challenge is to integrate this work into our regular curriculum. In this regard, the research and programs that are being discussed here today are most helpful and I'm very pleased to have been invited to share my own experiences in the critical area of civic engagement in the multiversity.

¹ There are significant differences in educational attainment across different Latino populations. For example, Cubans tend to have the highest educational attainment with 18.6 percent reporting a bachelor's degree or higher in 2002 compared to 7.6 percent of Mexicans (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002: slide 17).

² Procedurally, when we began the program, we opened it up to all 6th graders at a local elementary school who met the criteria of having parents who had not gone to a 4-year college and were low-income. All ENLACE scholars are Latino; most are Mexican. We began with forty 6th graders; four years later we have 32 young scholars.

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