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The Engaged Department: Public Sociology in the Twin Cities

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Public engagement is not new in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota (www.soc.umn.edu). From its creation in 1901, the University of Minnesota Sociology Department has been committed to public sociology. Pitirim Sorokin, exiled from Russia for his political opposition to Lenin, launched his path-breaking work on social mobility and democracy in our department. Arnold Rose was a member of the Minnesota State Legislature, and Caroline Rose established the American Sociological Association's Rose Monograph Series to bring sociological works to wide audiences and forge links between social science and social policy. This commitment to publicly engaged scholarship and teaching continues today.

Among the Department's diverse faculty research projects that contribute to critical public awareness and policy debates are studies of dual-earner couples, adolescent work and pathways of attainment, cultures of criminal punishment, uses of technology in American schools, high-stakes graduation tests, immigrant responses to post-9/11 changes in immigration laws, changing religious communities, foster parenting and care work, family friendly workplace policies, adolescent sexual activity, medical error and patient compliance, company investments in job skills training, patterns of violence against women, and certification processes in the juvenile court system. The public scholarship of our faculty members takes them around the globe, to study social movements in opposition to production of genetically modified food, environmental protest in Japan, World Bank environmental policies, global expansion of higher education, gender differences in political participation and partisanship in Europe, ethnic conflict in Latin America, affirmative action policies in Africa, and homelessness in European and American cities.

Going Public

Although good sociological research is often difficult to reduce to a sound-bite, sociologists have an important part to play in providing useful, accurate, and scientifically rigorous information to policy makers and community leaders. As sociologists who have neither the luxury nor the desire to stay in the ivory tower, our faculty members are committed to making their work—and themselves—available in a variety of public forums. They have served on the boards of a variety of nonprofit organizations, including Books for Africa and Civic Ventures, spoken to and consulted with various community organizations, testified at legislative hearings, and served as court consultants. Faculty members have appeared in local and national newspapers and been interviewed on radio and television about their research and its relevance to various publics. For example, the American Mosaic Project, directed by Doug Hartmann, Penny Edgell, and Joe Gerteis, has recently completed a nation-wide survey on how Americans understand religious, national, and racial differences and the findings are now making

their way into local and national news media. Phyllis Moen's research on aging and retirement was recently featured on 60 Minutes and Jeylan Mortimer's book on working and growing up in America was featured on the NBC Today Show and in the Wall Street Journal. Christopher Uggen's research on felon disenfranchisement was highlighted in a New York Times magazine article on the most important ideas of 2003. Kathy Hull recently testified at the Minnesota State legislature against a proposed constitutional amendment to ban same sex marriage.

Students Included

A strong commitment to public engagement is also evident in our teaching activities. In June 2002, Ron Aminzade, chair of the University of Minnesota Sociology Department, led a delegation of Sociology faculty members, the University's service learning coordinator, and a long-term community partner to participate in the National Campus Compact Summer Institute for the Engaged Department. Participants focused on how to more fully integrate community service learning into the undergraduate curriculum and provide more students with civic learning opportunities. The conference helped us assess departmental progress in developing community-based teaching and scholarship. To date, 20 faculty members and instructors have worked closely with the Career and Community Learning Center to incorporate community service learning into more than 15 different courses. Faculty members have recently created two new courses that feature service learning, "Service Learning in Criminology" and "Sociology of Work." We are now seeking external funding for a service learning graduate fellowship and developing a new capstone course ("Sociology and Society") for our 600+ majors. This course is designed to encourage our graduating seniors to think critically about the role of sociological knowledge in the contemporary world and to reflect on how the knowledge, skills, and insights of the sociological enterprise can be used and applied in their lives and careers outside of the university.

Community-based Research Workshops

The Department of Sociology has sponsored a series of workshops on community-based research and invited numerous speakers to campus to discuss strategies for integrating community-based research into our teaching. The departmental Teaching Resources Center (TRC), created in 1989, has continued to expand its collection of books, articles, and videos on community service learning. One recent graduate student TRC project involved compiling a comprehensive list of available community partners and their histories, along with valuable information on how to incorporate service learning into coursework. This year's annual departmental celebration, the Sociology Research Institute, featured a lively talk on "Public Sociologies" by Michael Burawoy. Professor Burawoy's presentation prompted the creation of a new departmental award for public sociology.

Academic Reward Structure

Strong institutional support for public scholarship has provided a catalyst for thinking more broadly about the meaning of public engagement in all aspects of our work. In June

2002 University of Minnesota President Robert Bruininks issued a call for the University of Minnesota to reassert its civic mission as a land grant public institution. He created a university-wide Council on Public Engagement (COPE) and charged the Council with the task of developing a systematic strategy to integrate public engagement across the full range of university activities. COPE initiatives include efforts to create rigorous standards for outreach work and a plan to acknowledge significant student involvement in community service learning by including a “community service scholar” designation on student transcripts. COPE has generated an interdisciplinary discussion of the meaning of public engagement and encouraged and recognized civic engagement through the Provost’s Outstanding Community Service Award and the funding of 34 Seed Grant Projects. The Council has developed measures for assessing the impact and outcome of publicly engaged activities, worked on making the university more accessible to external groups, and outlined a strategy for better informing broader publics about our academic work. Colleges across the university have begun to rethink reward structures so as to facilitate public engagement. Annual budget requests from each College now include a section in which they must identify their public engagement goals.

Our experience at the University of Minnesota underscores the crucial importance of providing institutional support and altering incentive structures to foster publicly engaged scholarship and teaching. Both the University of Minnesota and the sociology department are committed to continuing efforts to promote public sociologies through our teaching, research, and outreach. For many in the larger community, the university remains an intimidating and unapproachable elitist institution. With the recent decline in public support and funding for the university, the need for academics to connect with local and global communities is greater than ever. We seek to develop future practical innovations that will build mutually beneficial community partnerships, transform our academic culture and institutional identities, and make public engagement an institutional priority. Our department strives to be in the forefront of the discipline’s efforts to reclaim its heritage of active public engagement as we face the daunting challenges of the twenty-first century.