

Engaging Rural Communities through Service Learning

Engaged scholarship and service learning are key components of effective education and relevant research in our University. Importantly, rural areas pose special challenges when trying to develop engaged learning and research opportunities. A newly released book, *The Landscape of Rural Service Learning, and What It Teaches Us All*, is a compilation drawn from a longstanding project led by scholars from across the country and K-State sociologist Spencer Wood. The book frames the unique sets of challenges, opportunities, and needs facing rural areas within a context of improved educational experiences and efforts to fulfill the Land Grant mission to deliver services and knowledge to citizens. The book grew out of a collaborative effort among practitioners who met on several occasions over the last few years to share experiences and strategies around integrating service-learning into their curriculum focused on rural people. Wood and others drafted chapters based on their own experiences and collaboratively worked on conceptually framing the entire project. The result is the nation's first book-length treatment on service learning in rural areas.

Wood co-authored three of the chapters. The overview and summary chapter were deeply collaborative works among the practitioners and educators. Additionally, Wood co-authored a case study with former student Beth White to illustrate how single-placement service-learning experiences can be quite productive and compatible with the capacities and needs of rural communities. In their chapter Wood and White describe how Beth engaged in her senior capstone experience through an engaged research project with a farmer's cooperative in the San Juan Islands of the Pacific Northwest. Keys to the project's success included a sustained period of relationship building and problem identification with community members followed by a collaborative effort with community members to design a useful research project. The project surveyed cooperative members around the planning, acquisition, and deployment of one of the nation's first mobile slaughtering units. Beth successfully gathered useful information for Island Grown Cooperative while also engaging rigorous academic research. By selectively pairing a single student with a community organization, the project effectively avoided problems such as having too many students for an organization's capacity. In short, their project showed that selective placement of students in rural communities can be accomplished with highly effective results.

This initial handbook guides practitioners through some of the issues surrounding developing service learning in rural areas. It is divided into three parts: Rural Service Learning in Context, Rural Service Learning in Practice, and Rural Service Learning Looking Forward. The first part situates rural service learning in rural spaces both physically and theoretically and consists of five chapters. The middle section is a series of case studies from around the country. The final section then discusses matters of institution building to support rural service learning, risk and liability, and an overview of how service learning can lead to innovation in rural areas. Moving forward Wood and other members of the team are planning to further develop this scholarship and are in the process of planning their next convening for ongoing discussions.

The Landscape of Rural Service Learning, and What It Teaches Us All. Edited by Randy Stoecker, Randy, Nicholas Holten, and Charles Ganzert, 2016. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.