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Measuring Community and University Impacts of Critical Civic Geography: Insights from Chicago

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5 **Measuring Community and University Impacts of Critical Civic Geography: Insights from Chicago**

Daniel R. Block

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Euan Hague, Winifred Curran, and Howard Rosing

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Geographers have increasingly adopted community-based learning and research into their teaching and scholarly activities since Bunge and Harvey called for an applied public geography that is both useful and challenges societal inequalities. With few exceptions, however, there has been little discussion of methods for measuring this work. Many published assessments focus on the impacts of projects on students, but overlook the impacts on community partners. Impacts on faculty and the larger university community are also often ignored. This article discusses literature on the evaluation of community–university research and service learning from a critical perspective. A discussion of service learning and community-based research (CBR) projects at two Chicago universities, DePaul and Chicago State, is presented. In both cases challenges were encountered to achieve full evaluation of projects, yet both included an evaluation of university and community partners that allowed for assessment of the projects' value to all partners. **Key Words:** Chicago, community-based research, community engagement, service learning.

This article discusses ways to understand the impact of civically engaged geography. In his “Historical Materialist Manifesto” Harvey (1984) called for the development of “an applied peoples’ geography, un beholden to narrow or powerful special interests” (9). Inspired by reactions of radical geographers to positivist geographies of the 1960s, most notably Bunge’s urban expeditions (e.g., Bunge 1971; Merrifield 1995), Harvey (1984) promoted a theoretically based practical geography that worked with non-academics to complete projects designed to “be threaded into the fabric of daily life” but “confront or subvert the power of dominant classes or the state” (7). The discipline of geography is particularly well suited for such work. Geographers focus on patterns and processes seen on the ground. Much geographical research, such as climate change and gentrification, are of great interest to the public and often involves participation by both academics and nonacademics.

For Harvey this practical geography should be framed both by social theory and social justice, deal with day-to-day problems of communities, and be organized and structured not by university researchers, but by interests emerging from and driven by community groups. This parallels the call by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU 2012) for greater civic engagement by

academic institutions. The AACU suggests that service learning is a central pedagogical route to providing students with transformational lessons in community participation and civic life. “While service-learning research initially focused on impact on students,” argued the AACU (2012), “higher education service-learning programs have amassed greater understandings about how to establish more democratic, participatory, and reciprocal partnerships” (61).

Geography has a long history of engaging in community-based learning through field work with students. Community geography centers using geographic techniques to solve public problems have opened at Syracuse, Columbus State, and elsewhere (Robinson 2010). Despite these developments, there has been relatively little discussion of how to measure the impacts of such work. Service learning scholarship is helpful in this regard, because evaluation of service learning projects is yielding a wealth of lessons. Critical service learning (CSL) has emerged as a strategy combining service learning with critical and historical analysis of power structures and the origins of social injustice. CSL can be distinguished from traditional service learning by its “social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships” (Mitchell 2008, 62). The goal is to “deconstruct systems of power so the need for

service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled" (Mitchell 2008, 50)

Literature on community-based research (CBR) as pedagogy suggests that the approach can assist students and faculty in developing skills to critically engage with and evaluate the social, political, and economic realities that shape the lives of marginalized, oppressed, and resilient communities (Hofman and Rosing 2007). Contrasting a "radical CBR" service-learning approach built on Freireian principles with less critical approaches, Stoecker (2003) argued that "social justice, service-learning, and participatory research fit together to create a radical CBR model" (39). A key to the success of such a model is recognition that oppression is endemic in our society and that the hierarchal processes in community-based research and teaching are themselves under question and must be continuously evaluated to learn about how communities can most benefit from university resources (Stoecker and Tryon 2009).

The civic geography we present includes research and action, whether involving students or not, that is based in geographic theories and methodologies and works toward countering inequalities in society and promoting positive community change. Examples of civically and community-engaged geography are provided from two Chicago universities: DePaul and Chicago State University (CSU). DePaul is a Catholic university with 25,000 students (15,000 undergraduates) that mandates all undergraduates complete one experiential learning course such as an internship or service learning. DePaul's geography program strongly emphasizes service learning and CBR as part of its undergraduate major. CSU is a relatively small public university with around 3,600 students (2,400 undergraduates) on Chicago's South Side with a primarily African American student body. CSU's geography program works with community organizations to support research and action promoting community-led development projects. The examples highlight lessons learned from the multiplicity of ways geographers seek to create a civically engaged practical geography.

Measuring Impacts of Civic Geography

The civic geography of Harvey and Bunge means much more than simply doing research or teaching in communities. They explicitly called for a geography that engages with power structures imposed by "dominant classes or the state" (Harvey 1984, 7). As such, measurement of the impact of civic geography projects must go beyond counting participants to discussions of the impacts of projects on participants and communities seeking to resist oppression. Current thinking in the evaluation of service learning and community engagement has evolved from positioning service learning as a "top-down" activity where students or researchers mainly engage in small-scale service activities designed primarily by the university to activities

designed through ongoing partnerships between community members and university personnel (Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski 2011). Despite this, most service learning evaluations, even relatively involved ones, have focused largely on student attitudes and learning rather than on evaluating the experiences of the community organization (e.g., Miller 2013; Spalding 2013; one exception is Oldfield 2008). Such literature offers little insight into how or to what degree such forms of student engagement have subverted unjust power structures to benefit community partners.

Case Study 1: DePaul's "Contested Chicago" Project

Pilsen is a predominantly Latino immigrant neighborhood on Chicago's Lower West Side threatened by gentrification. Once home to a large Czech and Bohemian population, by the 1960s suburbanization and immigration created a neighborhood with a strong Mexican American identity. The neighborhood is highlighted as "hot" or "up and coming" by real estate interests, a sentiment confirmed by a *New York Times* Style column that celebrated Pilsen's vintage clothing resale stores, newly opened craft breweries, and restaurants (Glusac 2015). Meanwhile, local residents have become vigorous in their protests, for example, covering a newly opened coffee shop with slogans such as "Fresh Roasted Gentrification Served Here" (Hague 2015; Schmich 2015). In 2003, the Pilsen Alliance community organization approached DePaul University's Steans Center for Community-Based Service Learning requesting collaboration to better understand how gentrification was reshaping the neighborhood. The result was a partnership with the Department of Geography that, since 2004, has offered an annual service learning course exploring gentrification in Pilsen.

GEO133, Urban Geography Experiential Learning, is taught with a central focus on its Contested Chicago—Pilsen Building Inventory Project. The course integrates faculty teaching, service, and research alongside a community partner, the Pilsen Alliance, a social justice organization committed to developing grassroots leadership. The Alliance advocates for "quality public education, affordable housing, government accountability and healthy communities ... using innovative community education tools and programs, direct action organizing campaigns and advocacy initiatives reflecting the popular education philosophy of building social consciousness for personal and social collective transformation" (Pilsen Alliance 2016).

The objectives of GEO 133 are to provide a rich learning experience for undergraduate students, aid Pilsen Alliance in their campaigns around gentrification and affordable housing, and make complex issues like gentrification and policies like tax increment financing and zoning understandable to both students and community residents to promote informed civic engagement. Lectures outline geographical analyses

190 and theories of gentrification, balancing these with
shorter essays from local media that examine the
Chicago or Pilsen context. Students prepare discussion
notes based on these readings that are used in class-
room group work, enabling peer explanation and dis-
cussion of the material. Field trips to Pilsen highlight
recent disputes over, and locations of, condominium
development, housing demolitions, and community
activism.

For the service-learning component, every student
explores one block of Pilsen. Students visit their blocks,
assess the structural qualities of the properties and their
current uses, and then collect publicly available zoning,
tax, permit, and sales data. After completing the
research, students compile and analyze data to produce
graphs, charts, and maps for a final report about hous-
ing development on their block. Student reports are
shared with the Pilsen Alliance, and collated into a sin-
gle database that now contains ten years of data
available to the Pilsen Alliance on demand. The project
archives also contain hundreds of photographs, docu-
ments, and field notes pertaining to gentrification, hous-
ing, and neighborhood change in Pilsen.

Impact on Faculty

There is little doubt that the Pilsen Building Inventory
Project has raised the profile of the Department of Geog-
raphy internally at DePaul and assisted in the tenure and
promotion of Hague and Curran, who have also been rec-
ognized by the Pilsen Alliance with their Community
Collaborator award. The project's findings have been
consolidated into reports, informed a short bilingual book
exploring gentrification in Pilsen (Hague et al. 2008), and
were presented through local radio, television, and news-
papers. Participants have also presented testimony about
development in Pilsen to the Chicago City Council's sub-
committee on zoning and contributed to YouTube mate-
rials that support local campaigns to maintain affordable
housing in the community.

Impact on Students

Through the Steans Center, DePaul offers resources
for faculty and students to engage in community-based
service learning including action research and
advocacy. The undergraduate experiential learning
requirement allows GEO 133 to be consistently taught
and to nurture a long-term departmental–community
partnership with the Pilsen Alliance. This contrasts
with the AACU (2012) finding that despite the growth
of service-learning curricula across the United States,
“the vast majority of courses are still random electives
that students encounter in no particular order or time
sequencing” (59). Anecdotally, students have told fac-
ulty that the methods of data collection and analytical
techniques introduced in GEO 133 helped them pur-
sue careers in urban planning, real estate, and commu-
nity organizing. One alum wrote that his “field work

in the neighborhood of Pilsen provided processes and
techniques I've used throughout my career. Ten years
... later, I vividly remember the joy I felt from this
tangible project that was consequential to peoples'
lives; this was the moment I decided to become an
urban planner.” Further, students feel ownership of
the data and expertise about their block and many
have said that GEO 133 is one of their most important
courses. Comments from anonymous course evalua-
tions give some idea of how working with data to
assess gentrification affects students. One student
commented, “I never really thought about gentrifica-
tion or about how certain neighborhoods struggled,
until I came to this class,” and another noted, “It made
me see that the residents who live in Pilsen just want
to stay there—they don't want to be kicked out.”

Reflecting Mitchell's (2008) call for a CSL with a
social change orientation, these students' responses
also echo the AACU (2012) finding that “a significant
portion of college students are interested in commu-
nity service that leads to systemic social and political
change” (4). What is telling in the case of Contested
Chicago is that anecdotally many students are subse-
quently disappointed that their hard work in Pilsen
did not stop gentrification.

Impact on Pilsen

Assessing the impact of university–community proj-
ects on community members is more difficult. A lack
of time and resources have prevented a systematic
assessment of the impact of the Contested Chicago
project on Pilsen residents. Data from the inventory
are important to the Pilsen Alliance, however, because
they help quantify the process of gentrification, a
major concern of longtime neighborhood residents.
Maps and data presented at community meetings are
commonly supplemented by local knowledge of com-
munity members. The power of this type of popular
education is its potential to activate residents to craft
resistance campaigns and pressure local politicians and
others to hear concerns regarding affordable housing.
It also helps faculty identify additional areas of
research and action relevant to community concerns.
An early finding from the GEO 133 data was that
approximately 35 percent of homeowners in Pilsen did
not claim property tax exemptions to which they were
entitled. This resulted in the Pilsen Alliance and the
Cook County Assessor hosting workshops to aid resi-
dents to claim exemptions, saving low-income resi-
dents thousands of dollars. Indeed, one student in the
course who owned a property elsewhere in Chicago
also found that he was eligible for a property tax
refund! Comments from three successive Pilsen Alli-
ance executive directors demonstrate the effects of
university support for the organization. The first
noted:

We were able to leverage critical data on Pilsen's esca-
lating property taxes and precarious zoning

305 designation that made it so attractive for developers to
demolish older single-family homes into pricey multi-
unit condos. This partnership went beyond the collec-
tion of data, and provided institutional support and
legitimacy in advocacy efforts at the municipal level
that was critical in a city and city council that had
complete political control over land use and zoning,
310 completely disempowering city residents. (Alejandra
Ibañez, Executive Director, 2003–2010)

The second director, a longtime community orga-
nizer, explained:

315 Not long ago, those with an interest in developing
Pilsen regardless of the consequences for the residents
would claim that it was not clear that gentrification
was taking place, thus avoiding a discussion about dis-
placement and discrimination. Today, with the help of
Hague's research, we can face the real issues and talk
about real solutions. (Nelson Soza, Executive Direc-
320 tor, 2010–2015)

Finally, the current executive director, a former
Aldermanic candidate, stated:

325 The[ir] support and expertise . . . helped us and is
helping us to appeal decisions and plans made by city
planners, and offer feasible alternatives in consensus
with our community. (Byron Sigcho, Executive Direc-
tor, 2016–)

330 This continued evaluation and action research,
systematically incorporating feedback from partners,
point to the importance of learning how communities
can benefit most from university resources, using geo-
graphic theories and methodologies to counter
inequalities, challenge power structures, and ulti-
mately promote positive social change.

335 **Case Study 2: Chicago State University's Neighborhood Assistance Center**

340 CSU is a public predominately black institution (PBI)
primarily serving Chicago's South Side and southern
suburbs. In fall 2014, 72 percent of students identified
as African American. Seventy percent were female,
and 45 percent had at least one dependent. In general,
CSU students lead complicated lives that reflect the
characteristics of the community that surrounds the
university. CSU acknowledges this community posi-
345 tion with a mission that adds community development
to the traditional triumvirate of teaching, research,
and service. CSU hosts a medium-sized geography
program. Until recently, CSU hosted the only MA in
Geography at a PBI in the United States.

350 Since its beginning in the 1970s, the program has
had a focus on civic participation, influenced by Fred
Blum, its founding chair. The most lasting impact of
this focus was the creation of the Fredrick Blum
Neighborhood Assistance Center (NAC) to foster
355 self-reliant community development. This is accom-
plished through assisting in the development of

neighborhood planning projects and networks, per-
forming surveys and other analyses, and cartographic
and geographic information systems (GIS) assistance. 360
Small projects are performed for free by NAC staff,
student workers, and faculty, whereas larger projects
might be grant-funded, usually in partnership with
community organizations. Although the NAC does
connect organizations with service learning opportu-
365 nities within classes, more often students interact with
the community through the NAC through internship
placements or research assistantships and fellowships
that involve community-based learning. Although it
predated the term, the NAC could be considered a
community geography center. 370

Much of the NAC's work during the past ten years has
been focused on food access, but other projects have
included partnering with the Chicago Community
Health Worker Local Network and the Chicago Depart-
375 ment of Public Health, among others, on a survey of com-
munity health workers and a current project focusing on
the redevelopment of a dilapidated commuter train stop
near campus. A current long-term project is support for
and coordination of the Roseland-Pullman Urban Agri-
culture Network, a network of community gardeners and
380 urban agriculture practitioners on Chicago's Far South
Side. Grants are usually primarily for student support,
which is particularly important at CSU with its large pop-
ulation of nontraditional students with dependents.
Service learning can be difficult because of the extramural
385 obligations of many of the students (Block and Bouman
2007).

Measurement of the impacts of the NAC's work have
included a university-based annual evaluation tied to the
center's goals that primarily includes quantitative meas-
390 ures such as the number of grants applied for, the number
of community–university collaborations supported, and
the number of maps and other projects completed. This
evaluation is important for internal and external reporting
purposes, but the strictly quantitative nature means that it
395 does not include deeper stories of the outcomes of the
NAC's community engagement. For instance, three gar-
deners and urban agriculture practitioners who met
through the urban agriculture network pooled resources
to purchase a load of compost, the cost of which would
400 otherwise have been prohibitive. In another example, a
longtime partnership with food justice activists and the
City of Chicago led to questions being added to City of
Chicago grocery health inspections regarding availability
of fresh produce and meats that can be mapped using the
405 city's online data system (Castillo et al. 2013).

Such stories, typically backed with quantitative geo-
graphic data, are also part of NAC's project-based
evaluations that occur as a result of the Center's grant
funding. For instance, a U.S. Department of Agricul-
410 ture grant helped support outreach and curriculum
development related to CSU's aquaponics center,
which was installed in 2012 in an old shoe warehouse a
few blocks from the main campus. The goal of the
grant was to help CSU become the nexus of a South
415 Side urban agriculture network, through curriculum

development, workshops for the public, and network-
ing, with the aquaponics center serving as a spark for
curriculum development, research, and student and
community engagement.

Evaluation of the South Side Urban Agriculture project
was contracted with the Egan Urban Center (EUC) at
DePaul University and involved interviews with CSU stu-
dents, faculty, and community partners. Researchers
employed a participatory evaluation approach structured
to examine (1) program design and relevance to local
needs, (2) management, (3) effectiveness at achieving its
objectives, (4) impact on the direct and indirect beneficia-
ries, (5) satisfaction of the stakeholders, and (6) sustain-
ability of the project, its results, and impact.

Impact on Faculty

CSU faculty expressed support for the project. For
example, a CSU professor was especially pleased that
the program was firmly embedded in the geography
and biology departments and saw opportunities to fur-
ther integrate work with community partners into
curriculum:

I believe the strongest success of this project has been
the community engagement and outreach work. But
there are also many opportunities that have been cre-
ated through the project in the university as well. The
design of the curriculum is solid. (Zeigler and Rosing
2017)

Geography, multidisciplinary by design, is particu-
larly well suited to develop curriculum and recruit
teaching and support staff that serve the interest of
both students and communities.

Evaluation of the South Side Urban Agriculture Net-
work also highlighted challenges faced by faculty who, for
example, expressed concerns about course loads and
administrative responsibilities that make undertaking a
community engagement program less desirable. This is
especially the case when departments are understaffed or
do not have faculty who have the expertise to respond to
the often varied and multidisciplinary interests of com-
munity partners. The latter highlights a fissure between
higher education curriculum and the practical interests in
communities that do not necessarily align with discipli-
nary boundaries. Indeed, “an applied peoples’ geography,
un beholden to narrow or powerful special interests”
(Harvey 1984, 9) requires new interdisciplinary ways of
thinking about curriculum and faculty hires to meet
demands of a theoretically based practical geography that
works with nonacademics on projects designed, as Harvey
noted, to “be threaded into the fabric of daily life” while
confronting or subverting power.

Impact on Community Partners

Community partners expressed that participation in
the network led to learning from each other, creating
a community of gardeners working to build better

urban agriculture practices. This type of support is
particularly needed in the neighborhoods surrounding
CSU, where availability of fresh food is low and
gardeners play an important role in contributing to
the nutritional wellness of households and communi-
ties. Gardeners learned about resources available to
support their work and independently formed collabo-
rations with each other. Technical assistance sessions
provided relevant information and offered insight into
the potential for future expansion of the partners’ agri-
cultural initiatives. One community partner com-
mented, “Farming is a hard enterprise. Community
farming in a difficult neighborhood is hard. We got
lots of support and help from other farmers in the net-
work, from . . . [CSU] . . . and from the technical assis-
tance and workshops. The support was very
important. The information and resource sharing was
invaluable. This is the way to go for community
farms” (Zeigler and Rosing 2017).

As in the case of Pilsen, the “invaluable” quality of
grant-funded, capacity-building geography projects in
economically distressed spaces lies not so much in the
data produced as in the intangible contributions made
to community development. CSU’s partners noted the
desire for more assistance with, for example, urban
farm management, improving garden production,
negotiating with potential consumers such as local
schools, and paid positions (rather than volunteers) for
farm and garden managers. The partners suggested
that assistance with marketing their projects in the
community could help them gain more participation
from the local population.

Notwithstanding the benefits of grant-funded, com-
munity-based geography projects, there are also clear
drawbacks given their foundation in temporal funding
arrangements that can lead to challenges in consis-
tency, scope, and depth of outreach. Gardeners
expressed concerns that there was not always contin-
uity between network meetings and that information
was sometimes redundant. Some complained that
other participants were not always actively involved,
that the seed grants were modest in size given the
record-keeping demands, and that it often took too
long to receive payment. They wanted more coordina-
tion of project activities, improved cohesiveness
among participants, and more assistance navigating
bureaucracy and regulations underlying food produc-
tion and land tenure. Such sentiments point to the
need for more institutionalized forms of engagement.

Conclusion

Bunge (1971) noted, “geography is great and why
don’t geographers do some of it?” At both DePaul and
CSU, geographers are engaging with the social and
economic contexts of surrounding communities in
ways that are relevant to people’s daily lives. As with
Bunge’s Expeditions, the purpose at both these depart-
ments is to compile data “to promote community

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activism and enhance local empowerment” (Merrifield 1995, 56). Yet service learning and CBR must be understood through a critical lens, beginning with training faculty and staff to understand the power differential inherent in relationships between large higher education institutions and small, typically understaffed, financially vulnerable, community organizations (Mitchell 2008, 56–57). Calls for building “true community–university partnerships” (Mitchell 2008, 52) where community issues are as important as student learning are complicated by power imbalances leaning toward higher education institutions that themselves face internal challenges that hinder community engagement. Geographers can have a role in brokering those power imbalances.

Although the two Chicago examples are academic exercises in the coproduction of knowledge by the community, students, and faculty, the academy does not necessarily recognize such projects as scholarship. Indeed, in each case, instead of focusing on peer-reviewed articles, we instead produce analyses that are accessible to the community. This approach highlights the critical question of how academics and specifically geographers value civic work in an institutional environment in which “impact factors” and other quantitative measures of scholarship devalue such long-term civically engaged service learning and action research projects, and universities rarely offer faculty the time to develop community relationships (cf. Mountz et al. 2015). As geographers pursue more civically engaged projects, there will likely be new debates concerning what constitutes scholarship in the discipline and which new techniques can aid in sharing knowledge with communities. Publications such as this perhaps suggest that geography and the wider academy will, in the future, place more scholarly value on civic engagement. ■

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