

Action Research: The Highest Stage of Service-Learning?

by Douglas V. Porpora

Action research might arguably be considered the highest stage of service-learning. Service-learning is an attempt to unite two of the three usually separate functions that academic faculty are supposed to pursue: service and teaching. Yet the third academic function faculty are supposed to pursue — original scholarly research — has tended to remain less integrated within the service-learning movement.

As a form of service-learning, action research is a way of achieving an even higher synthesis, a way of uniting all three academic functions: service, teaching, and scholarship. Whereas the service-learning movement promotes community service as a form of teaching, the action research movement promotes scholarly research as a form of community service.¹ Thus, when action research is done with students, it becomes not only both service and scholarship but pedagogy as well.

As promising as that synthesis sounds, action research as a stage of service-learning is also a daunting endeavor, combining the difficulty of integrating service and pedagogy with the added difficulty of producing original scholarly research. Accordingly, the purpose of this essay is to examine not just the great potential that action research offers as a form of service-learning but the obstacles to it. For most of us who attempt it, action research will remain a stage of service-learning to which we may aspire, but a difficult stage to reach consistently.

What Is Action Research?

The concept of action research emerged as a reaction to the standard model of scholarly research that prevails in the academy. In the standard model, scholarship is the knowledge produced by the ongoing dialogue of a community of scholars. As that dialogue advances, like all dialogues, it leaves behind those not party to it. The scholarly dialogue develops its own categories and distinctions, issues and questions.

In empirical fields such as sociology, scholarly research proceeds from and for the academy. Scholarly research is undertaken to answer questions raised within an academic community of scholars, and, once the relevant observations are made, researchers return to the academy to present their findings to their peers. We sociologists may do ethnographies and other

kinds of research that aim to serve the poor and oppressed by uncovering the causes of poverty and oppression. Even then, however, our standard scholarly research remains oriented toward the academy. It is from the academic community of sociologists that our research questions arise. It is, consequently, toward our academic community of sociologists that our research agendas are directed. Ultimately, it will be other sociologists who principally consume our research product. Indeed, what makes this whole enterprise not just research but scholarly research is precisely its addressing of the issues and questions debated by a scholarly community.

While it is now fashionable to do so, such purely scholarly activity should not be dismissed. The academy remains one of the few sites left where certain fundamental questions are even raised. Where else, for example, is there critical dialogue on the nature of capitalism? It is not enough, moreover, simply to raise such questions. For there to be any advance on the answers, thinking must be sustained and cumulative. That requires the kind of engagement with previous thought that is the essence of scholarship. Even as a purely scholarly community, sociology has developed substantive findings, research methodologies, and theories that, were anyone besides ourselves to listen, would serve to build a better future.

There has been, nevertheless, a growing dissatisfaction with the standard model of scholarly research, a dissatisfaction that has become particularly acute among sociologists. The question raised by Robert Lynd (1939) some 50 years ago is still relevant today. We sociologists may be producing knowledge, but "knowledge for what?" When Lynd first asked that question, his concern was to move sociologists away from the production of knowledge that serves society's elites and more toward the production of knowledge that might serve the downtrodden. To a considerable extent, sociology has made that shift. The dominant sociological discourses today treat of oppression, domination, and exploitation in all their many guises. Today, we attend to the voice not just of first-world subordinates but also of postcolonial "subalterns" (Spivak 1988). No longer can anyone accuse our discipline of favoring the rich and powerful.

Yet we sociologists still experience dissatisfaction. One reason is that Lynd's question still goes unsatisfactorily answered. This knowledge we are producing, we still may ask, is knowledge for what? If we are now producing knowledge that might be used to right social wrongs, it remains perfectly clear that this knowledge is not being so used. Despite the issues we sociologists talk about, we come to find that we largely are talking to ourselves. What is to be done?

It is no use fooling ourselves with some "trickle-down" theory of academics. Trickle-down academics is what we offer the people we study when they ask us how our research will benefit them. We tell our subjects that

through us their voice will be heard, that other people will read about their situation and react to it. Something, somewhere eventually will be done. Results eventually will trickle down to affect our subjects' lives for the better. Perhaps we believe this. Perhaps it is true. The larger truth, however, is that the resulting trickle from trickle-down academics is generally no greater than what results from trickle-down economics.

Become public intellectuals, Russell Jacoby (1987) tells us. We should write in language accessible to the general public and on topics in which the general public is interested. Although this is sound advice, it is advice with definite limitations. First, even if we write accessibly and on topics aimed at a broad audience, the general reading public is small. According to educated estimates (Norman 1994), the readership for the serious fiction reviewed by *The New York Times* is well under a quarter million. The readership for serious nonfiction is presumably smaller. According to public opinion surveys, six is the median number of books read a year, and only two of the six tend to be nonfiction (Gallup 1993). The nonfiction reading is mostly "how to" books, biographies, spiritual guides, and manuals. There is a reason we sociologists write largely for ourselves.

A more fundamental problem is that even if we do determine to write for a broader audience, we may have no way to reach it. It is largely not our own decision whether we each become as public an intellectual as Russell Jacoby. Seemingly overlooked by Jacoby, there is a publishing industry out there with its own agenda and its own ideas about the marketability of what we have to say. In most cases, if we are not a brand name intellectual to begin with, we just are not destined to become one.

Action research is an alternative way to become a public intellectual. Instead of necessarily attempting to address a mass public, in action research sociologists become public co-partners in research with the local communities neighboring our academic institutions. Action research is not so much research done on a local community as research done with a local community. In contrast with the standard model of academic research, action research is research in which the community participates at all levels of the process. The community helps to design the study, the community helps to collect the data, and the community helps to analyze the results.

Because the community helps to design the study in the first place, the community has a share in the research agenda. That community voice ensures that the results of the research will be of consequence not just to the academic researcher's community of scholars but to the local community as well. What distinguishes action research, therefore, is its direct benefit to the community situated at the site of the study.

In the standard model of academic research — even in ethnographic research — community residents are relegated to objects of study. We, the

academic researchers, are the active subjects. We observe; they get observed. In action research, by contrast, community residents become co-active subjects with the academic researcher. Community residents participate, which is why some variants of action research are explicitly labeled *participatory action research* (Brown and Tandon 1983).

What the Civic Community Receives From Action Research

The active participation of a community in research is empowering. It is one way in which even the marginalized can begin to exert control over their own lives. When a community undertakes a neighborhood needs assessment, for example, it begins to give public thought and public voice to its own situation. It begins publicly and collectively to recognize that it has needs, that those needs are unmet, that those needs could be met.

Such reflection is an occasion for "conscientization" (Ellacuria 1991a, 1991b). Once people arrive at the recognition that they have unmet needs, they begin to ask why those needs are unmet. They begin to raise questions that are not just sociological but political as well. What, for example, would it take to get those needs met?

It is not just political consciousness that may be raised by such a research process. One of the afflictions of powerlessness is what Lerner (1986) refers to as "surplus powerlessness," the experience of having even less power than one actually has. The powerless frequently lack self-confidence, particularly the self-confidence to take collective action. Confidence is built only by historical experience, the historical experience of success. By successfully completing the successive tasks of a research project, a micro-history of success is communally experienced.

Along with change in community consciousness comes change in community organization. As is well known (see, for example, Wilson 1987), one of the problems of marginalized communities, particularly in our inner cities, is the abandonment of community-organizing institutions such as churches and clubs. Yet cooperative, coordinated research activity is itself an organizing process. People brought together and organized for research may remain together and organized for action.

Sometimes, the conscientization and community organization resulting from action research can be quite dramatic. For her master's thesis at Lincoln University, for example, Josephine Hood helped the residents of a housing project in Chester, Pennsylvania, conduct a needs assessment. Empowered by that experience, the city's project residents eventually assumed administrative control of the city's housing authority.

Perhaps even more dramatic is the case of the University of Central America (UCA) in El Salvador. Founded by the Jesuits in 1965, the UCA is an

entire institution committed to action research. In the case of the UCA, it is not just individual faculty members who partner with the oppressed but the university itself. Philosophy students are sent to help *campesinos* articulate their own conception of human rights. Psychology students document and explore the psychological effects of terrorism. Engineering students aid in the development of appropriate technologies. Sociology students discuss feminism with female factory workers (see Hassett and Lacey 1991).

Throughout El Salvador's long turmoil in the 1980s, the UCA was building an organic relationship with the country's poor, an organic relationship that had a mobilizing effect. That effect was so great that by 1989, the Salvadoran military took drastic measures to stifle it. In November of that year, the army surrounded the campus and murdered six of its Jesuit faculty, including Ignacio Ellacuria and Ignacio Martin-Baro, the rector and vice-rector of the school.

I happened to be in the city of San Salvador one year later, on the first anniversary of the martyrs' deaths. I was there as thousands of *campesinos* from across the country flooded into the capital for the commemoration ceremonies. I marched in their candlelight procession and joined them in singing, "Where, now, are the prophets?" I wondered how many of us North American academics would be so missed by even our neighboring communities.

Since action research is done in collaboration with a civic community that may develop a momentum of its own, there is no telling in advance just how politically dramatic will be the results of an action research project. Some of us may find that indeterminacy disconcerting, and, indeed, since most of us are not at places like the UCA, many of us may wonder just how politically dramatic our own institutions will tolerate our being. Even if our more conservative institutions will not murder us for our efforts, they may have other unpleasant ways to deal with us.

For better or worse, such worries probably need not concern us. While perhaps anything empowering is also political, action research need not be radical. Even when our own agenda is radical, dramatic effects will normally take a long time to incubate, long enough for us to ascertain our own comfort level with the direction events are taking. In the meantime, our successes, although real, will likely be small.²

Accordingly, at the more conservative of our institutions, administrations will hardly distinguish action research from service-learning in general, to which they accord attention only modestly beyond benign neglect. In such a context, our general worry will be not that we have become too visible but that we are not visible enough. Indeed, to the extent that our lives are governed by promotion and tenure decisions, a more pressing concern is the relationship between action research and scholarship.

Action Research and Scholarship

At the UCA in San Salvador, social research is not just observing. It is doing. Yet the question remains whether this doing, this action research, is also scholarship. Given the dissatisfaction with what currently passes for scholarship within the academy, some would argue that service research ought to count as scholarship too. Undertaken by sociologists, the argument goes, action research is a sophisticated endeavor that relies on sociological methods and insights, and yields a more efficacious result than most sociological research. Our understanding of sociological scholarship ought to be expanded to include it. While it certainly will not do simply to declare by fiat that service research is scholarship, we could theoretically stretch what we mean by scholarship to encompass it.

Alternatively, in keeping with the traditional notion of scholarship, we might simply recognize that some, but not all, service research is service scholarship. According to this alternative, which I tend to favor, to qualify as sociological scholarship, it is not sufficient that a research project draws on the theory, the methods, and the substantive insights of the scholarly community of sociologists. Instead, to be scholarship, the research must in some way give something back not just to the civic community we partner with but to our scholarly community as well. To be sociological scholarship, the research must in some way advance the ongoing scholarly dialogue of sociologists.

On this criterion, much of the service research I, myself, do with my students may be good service-learning, but it is not service scholarship. One course I teach, for example, is on computer-assisted data analysis, using SPSS. Whereas in the past my students would have analyzed an arbitrary data set, I have lately tried to make this offering into a service-learning course by having the students analyze data that local community organizations need to have evaluated. Usually, representatives from such organizations as the Red Cross or United Way come to the class with completed questionnaires. The students then code the questionnaires, enter the information into the computer, and analyze it statistically. The community organizations receive a final report.

Because my students now see themselves as directly serving the community, they consider the course much more meaningful than before. It happens that some students drop the class and forget to return the questionnaires they had been assigned. As this usually entails only a few lost cases, I normally do not worry about it. The remaining students, on the other hand, sometimes astonish me. It has happened that they have tracked down the dropouts, recovered the data assigned to them, and entered the information into the computer themselves. The community, those students have felt,

needed all the data it had given us.

The community organizations are always grateful for the analyses they receive from this class. Yet while the data are always sociological, they have so far lacked broad sociological significance. Although I always look for it, the data have not yet offered any new substantive or theoretical insights to the academic community of sociologists. Accordingly, there has never been any call for me to approach our community partners about the possibility of publishing an article on the results.

What I do with this class may be good service research. Insofar as I also do the research with students, it may likewise occasion good service-learning. I do not think, however, that such research qualifies as service scholarship.

If that assessment is correct, we begin to see why scholarly action research is so daunting. It requires us simultaneously to meet two separate agendas of two separate communities. It requires us to do research in collaboration with a civic community that directly benefits that civic community, research that at the same time also addresses issues of concern to the scholarly community of academic sociologists. Those of us who undertake scholarly action research must, therefore, occupy a marginal position between two worlds.

The dilemma is that the research interests of the academic community will not automatically coincide with the research interests of the civic community. We already know that much of what interests the academic community is of little direct benefit to our civic communities. Conversely, much of the research that might benefit our civic community will be of little interest to our academic community.

The solution to the dilemma is not to discard one of its horns; the solution is not simply to say "damn the academic community." That would surrender the real potential of action research to be scholarship, even as the academic community currently understands that term. It would surrender as well the appeal of self-interest the academic community has in doing scholarship. At the University of Pennsylvania, Harkavy and his colleagues (Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett 1994; Harkavy and Puckett 1995) maintain that action research represents potentially better scholarship than we have been doing. The solution, then, is to prove it. The solution is to address the interests of the civic community and the academic community simultaneously.

Can that be done? Although such a dual objective is difficult to accomplish, it can be accomplished. We at Drexel University have accomplished it ourselves at least once — and accomplished it, moreover, as a form of service-learning. I had received a small grant from the national Campus Compact to do action research with my students. I placed them over three terms at a community center in a largely African-American neighborhood close to Drexel. One of the students, who happened to be from Japan, man-

aged to build a strong relationship with the center's senior group, to whom she taught origami.

By the third term of the project, we began to explore research possibilities with the senior group. Although the senior group offered a great range of activities and services, its funding depended on its lunch program. Unfortunately, so few people were participating in the lunch program that the group's overall funding was endangered.

I referred my student to a gerontologist in our department, and together they developed a questionnaire in collaboration with the senior group to find out why more neighborhood seniors did not eat lunch at the center. The questionnaire was then broadened so as to offer as well a needs assessment of neighborhood seniors. The sample was generated snowball fashion by the participating members of the senior group, who, along with college-age VISTA volunteers, were trained to interview neighborhood seniors in their homes. The senior member of each two-person team put the interviewee at ease, and the VISTA volunteer administered the questionnaire.

The whole process served as a recruitment tool, and the lunch program gained enough new participants to preserve overall funding. At the same time, the study generated findings that were of interest not just to the neighborhood senior group but to academic social science as well. It turned out that there was a scholarly literature in gerontology on senior centers to which our findings spoke. Moreover, our study documented that, for various reasons, many neighborhood seniors were not receiving the government services or benefits to which they are entitled. That was an important sociological finding as well.

The entire study became our student's senior thesis, which won the department's senior thesis award. Revised versions of the paper were presented at the Eastern Sociological Society (Mizuno, Kutzik, and Porpora 1994) and the Gerontological Society of America (Kutzik, Mizuno, and Porpora 1995) meetings. We further expect some version of this paper eventually to be published. Here, then, is one example of an action research project that was arguably a success both as service and as scholarship.

It is one thing to do research as a service to the community. That will always remain an important part of our vocation. It is also important to do service research with our students so that it becomes a form of service-learning. When, however, we specifically undertake to do action research as a form of scholarship, we must choose our sites and projects with theoretical care. However much they may benefit the community, not all projects will be equally likely to contribute to the scholarly dialogue of our discipline. In advance, therefore, we need to bring to service scholarship a strong appreciation for theoretical and substantive issues and choose those projects most likely to address them.

The scholarship associated with action research may take many different forms. At this early stage, it may still be a scholarly contribution to our discipline just to undertake a project that illustrates how action research is done. As time goes on, however, there ought to be a deepening scholarly dialogue about action research itself. What are the variants of co-participation? Who exactly constitutes the civic community with whom we are to partner — community organizations or their clients? These are theoretical questions about action research that action researchers might address in a scholarly way. Action research poses methodological issues too, relating to such matters as diversity and voice. Such methodological issues may be likewise the subject of action research scholarship (see, for example, Kelly 1993).

Ultimately, however, if action research is not to be ghettoized as just another sectional interest within sociology, its scholarly results will have to speak to the broader discipline. If Harkavy and his colleagues are correct that action research represents a better form of research, then that will have to be evident from its yield independent of the participatory method employed. The writings of the UCA Jesuits (see Hassett and Lacey 1991; Petras and Porpora 1993) lay a theoretical foundation for the scholarly promise that action research offers, but eventually that promise to the discipline will need to be routinely fulfilled.³

Action Research as a Form of Service-Learning

As difficult as it is just to do scholarly action research, such research is even more difficult to do with students as a form of service-learning. When service scholarship is done with students, the students themselves will need to be academically prepared. They, too, will have to be alive to the disciplinary issues on which the unfolding research might touch.

Even to begin a scholarly action research project presupposes an ongoing relationship with a civic community. Those of us from the academy — whether professionals or students — cannot just arrive on site with an invitation to do research together. If the research is to be collaborative, the civic community and the academics need to develop a mutual understanding of what each other is about. Such relationship building is a long-term process with important implications for student involvement. The long-term nature of relationship building makes it difficult — although not impossible — to do action research with students in a single term. Ordinarily, at least a term will be needed to develop a relationship with a community partner. That may be accomplished by having students engage in service-learning at the community site.

Whatever methodology the specific action research project will ultimately employ, at the stage of relationship building, the process will share

characteristics with ethnography. Ethnographers spend a long time with the group they are studying just getting acquainted. During that time, ethnographers may anxiously wonder whether what they are doing will lead to a scholarly result. The same worries will afflict action researchers at this stage. The professors involved will themselves need to be patient. The students in turn will need to be reassured that they are not required to produce a research product. At this stage, they must be told, service-learning is all that is expected. If, however, some scholarly research is to eventuate, then the students must be sensitive to the research possibilities that might be suggested to the community partner. The students must become like ethnographers, knowing what to observe, what is of potential sociological significance and what is not. That in turn requires the students to receive some training in ethnographic methods.

If students are to be involved in action research over several terms, that possibility must be institutionally created in the curriculum. The solution my department has adopted may not work everywhere. Drexel University is on a quarter system, and students typically take between five and seven courses a term, an excessive course load for reflective thought. Yet that very course load has allowed us to open space for our students to participate in action research. Specifically, over their years with us, sociology majors are now required to take the equivalent of three to five courses in supervised field placements that begin as service-learning and potentially end with an action research proposal. Should students emerge from their service-learning experience with an action research proposal, they can pursue that research over another three terms as their senior thesis.

This arrangement works out well for the students but not necessarily for the faculty. While the students are now academically compensated for their service-learning/action research activity, the faculty are not. The teaching burden on the faculty supervising the field placements has, accordingly, risen. Ideally, such added faculty burden should also be institutionally addressed.

The arrangement also presents faculty with a pedagogical problem: continuity. If an action research project spans multiple terms, some students will continue with it and some will not. Each term, the supervising faculty member is confronted with the possibility of too few students to maintain project continuity or, at best, students at different levels of initiation. In the latter case, the faculty member must acquaint new students with both the community partner and the scholarly issues involved while maintaining the interest of continuing students. This is not an easy task.

In short, scholarly action research itself is not easy, and it is all the more difficult when it is done with students as a form of service-learning. There is, however, one consideration that makes it all less daunting than I have

portrayed it. Instead of specifically setting out to do scholarly action research, we should perhaps see it as an ever-present possibility that may grow out of our ongoing service-learning relationships with our various community partners. If scholarly action research is a goal, then at least some of our community partners ought to be chosen for their potential to realize that end. Even then, however, since action research is participatory, we will have no advance certainty about what if any scholarly contribution will result. Students and faculty must both simply remain alert to the scholarly potential.

In the meantime, if both faculty and students remain oriented toward action research possibilities, students' service-learning experiences can be considerably enriched. Such an orientation pushes students further to connect their service experiences with the scholarly literature. It prompts them to begin asking themselves scholarly questions: How might this concrete experience of mine be expanded into a study that supports or challenges some aspect of the literature? How might such a study elaborate on or fill the gaps in what the literature has already discussed?

If we think of scholarly action research as always an inherent possibility in an ongoing service-learning relationship, then its ideal form need not be consistently reached. There are levels of scholarship. The standards that apply to a professional journal or scholarly conference need not be applied to an undergraduate senior thesis. Even if an action research project falls short of professional standards of scholarship, it still may constitute a very advanced form of service-learning.⁴

There are levels, too, of co-participation with a civic community. Ideally, perhaps, one and the same research question will be both academically interesting and of concern to the civic community. In that case, the interests of the academic and civic communities will be exactly aligned. At other times, however, we may apply the same research that serves a civic community to different, academic ends. Alternatively, we may simply piggyback academic research on research that serves a civic community. Sometimes, too, we may just use our service to the community as an occasion to do our own independent sociological research. There is much that might potentially fall under the label of co-participation.

In the end, if we faculty do not expect too much of ourselves, if we do not necessarily stake our entire scholarly careers on doing action research, then the ideal of scholarly action research will always remain a way for us to deepen our students' service-learning experience — and our own.

Notes

1. There is a large, interdisciplinary literature on action research. However, for those looking specifically for an introduction to the sociological literature, see the November and December 1993 issues of *The American Sociologist*, which, under the special editorship of Edna Bonich and Randy Stoeker, were entirely devoted to the topic.
2. What happens to an activated, conscientized community when a professor decides things are getting too politically hot for him or her? One answer is that we should determine in advance the likely political outcomes of our projects and not undertake anything we are unwilling or unable to see through. This, however, is not a fully adequate answer. Even with advance visualization, we may still be overtaken by "the cunning of history."
3. Edward Zlotkowski (1996) makes a similar point about service-learning in general. Zlotkowski argues that service-learning educators need "to begin writing not just for publications targeted at a service-learning audience but also for professional journals in their field" (128). Whether action research is done as a form of service-learning or not, its results must eventually contribute a content interesting to sociological journals that do not have action research as their focus.
4. Academics, of course, should always be up front with their community partners if they see their involvement with the community as also a potential project for research scholarship. In an ongoing relationship between academic and community partners, it might be established initially that some projects will emphasize direct service to the community, while others will tend primarily to address a scholarly audience. As long as there is fair give-and-take in this regard, the relationship will be mutually beneficial.

Students, too, should be acquainted early with a project's goal — whether that goal is primarily service to a community, primarily scholarly, or both simultaneously. Doing both simultaneously is clearly the most difficult undertaking. Students, consequently, have little difficulty shifting back from that ambitious goal to either pure community service or pure scholarship. In our program, one of the challenges we set for both our students and ourselves is to take an ongoing service-learning experience and eventually develop a project that is also of scholarly interest. That shift is difficult for our students and for us.

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61/0631a

Cultivating the Sociological Imagination

Concepts and Models
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in **Sociology**

James Ostrow, Garry Hesser, and Sandra Enos, volume editors
Edward Zlotkowski, series editor

A PUBLICATION OF THE



This monograph was published in cooperation with:

American Sociological Association
1307 New York Avenue NW, #700
Washington, DC 20005
ph 202/383-9005
fax 202/638-0882
www.asanet.org

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Edward Zlotkowski, series editor

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About This Publication

This volume is one of eighteen in AAHE's Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines to be released during 1997-1999. Additional copies of this publication, or others in the series from other disciplines, can be ordered using the form provided on the last page or by contacting:

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ISBN (18 vol. set) 1-56377-005-9

About This Series

by Edward Zlotkowski

The following volume, *Cultivating the Sociological Imagination: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Sociology*, represents the seventh in a series of monographs on service-learning and academic disciplinary areas. Ever since the early 1990s, educators interested in reconnecting higher education not only with neighboring communities but also with the American tradition of education for service have recognized the critical importance of winning faculty support for this work. Faculty, however, tend to define themselves and their responsibilities largely in terms of the academic disciplines/interdisciplinary areas in which they have been trained. Hence, the logic of the present series.

The idea for this series first surfaced late in 1994 at a meeting convened by Campus Compact to explore the feasibility of developing a national network of service-learning educators. At that meeting, it quickly became clear that some of those assembled saw the primary value of such a network in its ability to provide concrete resources to faculty working in or wishing to explore service-learning. Out of that meeting there developed, under the auspices of Campus Compact, a new national group of educators called the Invisible College, and it was within the Invisible College that the monograph project was first conceived. Indeed, a review of both the editors and contributors responsible for many of the volumes in this series would reveal significant representation by faculty associated with the Invisible College.

If Campus Compact helped supply the initial financial backing and impulse for the Invisible College and for this series, it was the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) that made completion of the project feasible. Thanks to its reputation for innovative work, AAHE was not only able to obtain the funding needed to support the project up through actual publication, it was also able to assist in attracting many of the teacher-scholars who participated as writers and editors.

Three individuals in particular deserve to be singled out for their contributions. Sandra Enos, former Campus Compact project director for Integrating Service With Academic Study, was shepherd to the Invisible College project. John Wallace, professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota, was the driving force behind the creation of the Invisible College. Without his vision and faith in the possibility of such an undertaking, assembling the human resources needed for this series would have been very difficult. Third, AAHE's endorsement — and all that followed in its wake — was due largely to then AAHE vice president Lou Albert. Lou's enthusiasm for the

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