

Building Partnerships for Educational Activities in Environmental Justice Communities

Environmental Justice (EJ) is a topic that lends itself well to the goal of civic engagement. In 2007 I gave a presentation titled “Incorporating Social Justice into Geoscience Topics” at a Cutting Edge Workshop, “Preparing for an Academic Career in the Geosciences.” My theme was the same as this workshop’s. Many geoscience topics fold into the EJ nexus of health, environment, law, urban planning, and racial equity. This panoply of societal issues promotes opportunities for multidisciplinary teaching, experiential learning and service learning, and community-based research. Because EJ inspires passionate advocacy, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between “religion” and “religious studies,” between “environmentalism” and “environmental studies,” and between “environmental justice – the movement” and “environmental justice – the academic subject.”

My first exposure to the “Geo” in “Environmental Justice” came during a meeting of the National Association of Black Geologists and Geophysicists (NABGG) in 2000 and hearing David Padgett describe the siting of landfills in environmental justice communities. When I subsequently received an announcement from the University of Wisconsin’s Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies about offering an evening summer forum on contemporary issues in American society, I suggested in an email that “Environmental Justice” would be a good topic. In return I received the (paraphrased) response “Yes, Herb, somebody should.” As a co-organizer with a budget we could bring in national figures such as Sheila Foster, Vernice Miller-Travis, and Bob Knox.

The summer forum led to teaching a First-year Interest Group (FIG). For their open-ended, term-project requirement, five students visited the People for Community Recovery (PCR) in Altgeld Gardens, an EJ community on the far south side of Chicago. The “Gardens” forms a chapter in President Obama’s biography, *Dreams from My Father*. A picture in the PCR office shows its founder, Hazel Johnson, in the Oval Office witnessing President Clinton sign Executive Order 12898. A second group in my FIG wrote a grant proposal for offering an EJ summer course that contained several field trips and included high school teachers. I taught the summer course three times, an honors seminar, and then a spring break trip in 2005 to “Cancer Alley” between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Our itinerary included visits with a remarkable set of EJ activists and scholars: Willie Fontenot, Beverly Wright, Darryl Malek-Wiley, Wilma Subra, and Adam Babich. The contact with Darryl Malek-Wiley, EJ organizer for the Sierra Club in New Orleans, led to our graduate Water Resources Management students to the Lower Ninth Ward post-Katrina. Students from two different years prepared reports dealing with the feasibility of restoring a 440-acre body of open water adjacent to the flood wall on Florida Avenue, which, as recently as the 1970s, was a cypress forest. Climbing an eight-foot wall to look at a wetland or watching a barge glide by above your head gives meaning to living below sea level. Mixed classes of undergraduates and graduate students went for two subsequent summers and most recently a group of freshmen in our residential environmental learning community went over spring break. Over the seven years, many new relationships were developed and previous ones deepened. A partial list of those who provided numerous teachable moments includes: Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (HCNA), Tulane’s Center for Bioenvironmental Research, New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board (NOSWB), ‘Mac’ McLendon’s The Village, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy, Turtle Cove Environmental Research Station, Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School, Our School at Blair Grocery, Smitty, John Taylor, and John Koefel and his Citizens Against Widening the Industrial Canal.

A number of students over this decade of EJ classes found their experience to be transformative, as did I. The neighborhood crawfish boils and the 4th of July on the levee are cherished memories. While definitely rewarding, there are issues and obstacles that arise in offering experiential, service learning and service research courses in an EJ community.

- How can the educational mission of a university match the needs of communities and their organizations?
- What are the learning outcomes for students?
- How can relationships between universities and its community partners be sustained?
- How can universities form partnerships with each other and with community organizations and NGOs to provide place-based EJ learning opportunities?
- Are 'toxic tours' exploitive?
- How do we ensure that we maintain an appropriate level of academic rigor and objectivity?

I thank the organizers for bringing us together and I look forward to participating.

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