

Supporting and engaging community college sociologists

Stu Shafer, Professor, Sociology; Chair, Sustainable Agriculture, Johnson County Community College

Probably the most helpful resource the ASA has for community college sociologists is their Teaching Resources And Innovations Library for Sociologists (T.R.A.I.L.S.) website (<http://trails.asanet.org>). Essentially, what ASA has done is to put its entire teaching and learning library online in an interactive format. More than just a repository, it is a two-way medium. Not only can members search the library for everything from class activities to syllabi, they can also submit their own materials for publication. Of course, a key word in that description is "members." Access to the full site and submission rights is available for a membership fee, and ASA members get a substantial discount. Thus, community college faculty participation in this resource library is most likely dependent on their membership in the association, and in my experience those faculty who are not already association members are not especially interested in the resource.

Still, since this professional organization typically assumes that the proper place for community college faculty is in the teaching and learning section, this resource is the most likely interface for their participation. I have not investigated the extent of that participation, but I do know how I might be able to find out. And I have had some of my own materials published there (mainly because they had been published in print form by ASA prior to this move online, and it was a simple matter of giving permission for the online publication). Given that most community college members of ASA participate most actively in the Section on Teaching and Learning, I would guess that many of those are also significant participants in TRAILS.

The second thing the ASA has done to assist community college educators has been to establish two task forces devoted to enhance the association's responsiveness to community college faculty needs. Although recommendations of the first task force were not all implemented, leaving some frustration among those who were aware and had participated, the ASA has recently appointed a new task force that is just beginning its work. There is hope that this current effort will lead to significant changes in the openness of the organization to community college folks and a solid empirical understanding of their specific needs, resulting in the development of new structures and programs to meet those needs.

As for a new, funded initiative the ASA could provide that would engage more community college faculty and serve as a center and vehicle for more effectively meeting their needs, I think the establishment of a Section and Committee for Community College Sociologists would be most effective. I believe that membership in this section should be automatic for all community college faculty who join the organization, and in recognition of their generally lower rate of pay than that for university faculty, a discounted membership structure between the regular dues and those of graduate students should be established to further nurture and encourage the new

section.

Care should be taken to ensure that the implementation of the section would not diminish community college participation in the section on teaching and learning, including in its leadership. The section would be specifically charged with investigating the particular conditions of sociology in community colleges, and would recommend policies that would address those particular needs as well as unrecognized strengths inherent in the role community college faculty play in providing entree for as many as half of undergraduate students to the discipline.

In this way, community college sociologists would have the institutionalized opportunity to participate as full members in the ongoing social construction of the science and the discipline. I am not just talking about engagement of community college faculty as passive observers of the "real" work of "real" sociologists at the baccalaureate and graduate degree institutions. I am talking about engagement in the work itself, a kind of public sociology of sociology, whereby the strengths and experiences of community college sociologists as social sciences is given not only recognition, but also empowerment within the discipline itself.

Such engagement (and empowerment) in the professional organization would, in turn, further energize and enhance the role of sociologists in their own colleges and communities. I firmly believe that until sociology in the community college becomes active public sociology, bringing the science of sociology to bear on the needs and development of the communities that community colleges serve, community college sociology will not have reached its full promise as a discipline.