

The Metropolitan Seminar: Community Building in Chicago
Spring, 2008
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Overview

Over the last decade, much has been made of the 'breakdown of community' in modern society. Everything from economic disparities to the Internet has been blamed for this phenomenon. But, here in Chicago (and in other cities across the country), a rising tide of community building is providing the most creative solutions to difficult problems—homelessness, disaffected youth, epidemics of obesity and diabetes to name a few.

Objectives

Community building is central to the field of Community Development, a way of thinking about people and places that had its birth here in Chicago, and Chicago is still the home of its best innovators.

- We will use the city as a laboratory as we examine the ways in which people come together to address issues, make change, and become true neighbors.
- We will learn some of the language of Community Development; think of this as kind of an Intro Course.
- We will engage each other in discussion regarding our experiences and reading, attempting to arrive at our own visions of community.

Readings

Putnam, Robert and Feldstein, Lewis; Better Together: Restoring the American Community (2003) Available at Sandmeyer's Books.

Daily attention to city issues through either the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times (in-hand or on-line) or through viewing Chicago Tonight on WTTW Channel 11. (7-8 PM)

Various shorter readings (to be supplied).

Requirements

The requirements for this class are as follows:

- We will spend lots of time in the class in discussion and debate of material presented in readings and by speakers. Since the class will be seminar-sized, there will be no hiding place with regard to attendance and discussion. So just come prepared to talk, listen and generally be present in the room. 30% of your grade.
- Much of the material in this class will come in the form of short readings and chapters from texts. Although I try to find the most interesting material I can, I will ask each of you to respond in writing to every assigned reading. This will help me to determine your interests and get your input on the direction the class is taking. These short Reading Responses will be collected every class and not welcomed late. 30% of your grade.
- Finally, you will investigate some issue related to community building and how a particular community works on it. Rather than writing a research paper on this, I'd like you to get out into the city and learn all you can. Then you will come back and teach us about it through a presentation to the class. I encourage you to do this in teams. Go together, split the work, take responsibility for different parts of the presentation. We'll talk more about this as the semester progresses, but that's the framework. 40% of your grade.

A few times during the semester we will leave the CS office and go out into communities. On these days, class will probably run longer. I will let you know in advance when this is going to happen, but, as a general rule, don't plan anything on Wednesdays after 4:30 until dinner time.

OK, here are the nuts and bolts:

Syllabus (Tentative)

Part 1: What is Community?

Session 1 (2/4): Introduction to the class and each other.

Session 2 (2/13): What is Community? Is it a place? Is it a group of people? Is it real or virtual? Come prepared to discuss your ideas and to describe your communities.

READ: "The Journey Home" by Stephanie Mills; the Introduction to Never a City So Real by Alex Kotlowitz; (to be supplied.)

Session 4 (3/12): Some Background and Frameworks. All of the questions we've encountered so far are the meat and gristle of the field of Community Development. And they have a special meaning to Chicago, often seen as the birthplace and still-leading innovator in Community Development. So today I will bring you up-to-date on some issues regarding CD and CD in Chicago.

READ: "A Success Story" from The Economist, "Thinking About Social Change in America" by Robert Putnam and "John Deere and the Bereavement Counselor" by John McKnight

Session 4 (2/27): Community For Who(m)? What kind of community tolerates homelessness? How are people who are often seen as the most marginal in society brought into community? We'll address those questions today.

READ: Better Together, pp.142-165; 186-205

Part 2: Building People and Places

Session 5 (3/5): R. C. Longworth. Today we will join the other Metro Seminar sections to hear Longworth, the author of Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism, a sort of big picture analysis of the future of the entire Midwest, with Chicago at its center.

READ: Longworth's shorter version from the Chicago Tribune Magazine, "Can the Midwest Regain Its Economic Clout?" (To be supplied)

Session 3 (2/20): Building Relationships. Asset-Based Community Development stresses the importance of building relationships among folks who aren't often together. We'll look at the ways in which gifted individuals can contribute to community.

READ: Better Together, pp. 1-74.

Session 7 (3/19): Streets of Hope. Today we will look at a story from Boston in which one community reclaims itself against all odds. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has changed the way foundations approach communities, and has transformed one neighborhood forever.

READ: Better Together, pp 75-118

Session 8 (3/26): Sustainable Community. For communities and their inhabitants to be healthy enough to survive, they must understand and change some very large systems. We'll talk about those systems today and see these changes taking place.

READ: Selections on Sustainability (to be supplied)

Session 9 (4/2): Communities and Food Policy. More than any other system, food production/distribution is not sustainable. Local people are recognizing this fact and creating solutions that are not only surprising, but life-giving.

READ; Material from Chicago Food Policy Council and Growing Power (to be supplied.)

Session 10 (4/9): LVEJO. We will visit the Latino Community of Little Village today. A small but very amazing group of neighbors has taken the health and welfare of that community into their capable hands.

Part 4: Building Power

Session 11 (4/16): Saul Alinsky and Community Organizing. One amazing Chicagoan used his insights into the meaning of power and the motivations of people to create a system through which ordinary people can change institutions. We'll learn about community organizing today and hear some organizing stories.

READ: Selections from Saul Alinsky (to be supplied)

Session 12 (4/23): Organizing Today. Today we'll meet with one of the city's most well-known organizers to hear what issues are being fought in Chicago communities.

READ: Better Together, pp. 166-186 and material from Midwest Academy (to be supplied).

Part 5: What Do You Think?

Sessions 13 and 14 (4/30 and 5/7) Student groups will present their favorite community building efforts. More on this later.

Chicago Semester will make reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students can alert us in the "Additional Information" portion of the Application Form prior to their coming, or they can notify the Director privately if necessary. Students should also alert their instructors during the first two weeks of class so that accommodations can be made. For further assistance, contact Clinton Stockwell at Clintons@chicagosemester.org.