

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CASES

THE “HELPING” PARADOX

SUMMARY: Recognizing your role in a community and addressing mistakes along the way.

CASE TYPE: Practical

Practical cases offer procedures and strategies for handling situations that one might encounter in community engaged work. These cases have answers that would be considered appropriate and others that would be ill advised.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) • Collaboration • Humility	1. Analyze the ethics of service and intervention, especially when outsiders initiate projects. 2. Distinguish between asset-based, collaborative engagement and deficit-based or charity-driven approaches. 3. Develop awareness of positionality and how local knowledge and power dynamics should shape immersive work. 4. Recognize the role of humility in authentic partnership and collaboration.

SCENARIO

Alicia, a senior political science student, is in her 4th week of a summer internship with a community development organization in her college town. Most of her work has been behind the scenes - assisting in the development of neighborhood plan documents, reviewing community feedback, and communicating with developers. She loves the work, but wants to get more hands on with the community before she returns to school for the fall semester. She knows that one of the neighborhood parks has had its regular cleanup delayed for months due to upcoming park renovations. Alicia decides to organize a cleanup event to improve the park until the renovations can occur. She invites friends from school and a community service club from a neighboring university. Alicia doesn't run this by Rachel, her supervisor, as she sees it as an external service event. Alicia leads her group in an intensive cleanup of the park that Saturday morning. That Monday, Rachel comes into her office with a neighborhood resident that Alicia has become familiar with. This longtime resident saw Alicia at the park over the weekend. She came in to politely thank the group for their work, but mentions they accidentally removed a section of plants grown intentionally by neighbors for a community project. Afterward, Rachel shares that multiple community members were upset that she “barged in” without talking to anyone. Rachel notes that she understands Alicia's intentions, but that this should have been communicated in advance so that problems like this could be avoided. Alicia is deeply embarrassed - her good intentions have had the opposite impact and she is not sure what she should do next.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can good intentions potentially lead to harm? How can you compare and contrast intent and impact?
2. Reflect on how motivation to “do good” or “make an impact” can inadvertently cause disruption or offense.
3. What might Alicia have assumed about the neighborhood or its needs? What assumptions did she make about “helping” in this scenario?

4. How might this situation harm trust between communities and those who seek to “help” them?
5. What could community-informed collaboration have looked like?
 - a. Are you familiar with [Asset-Based Community Development](#)?
 - b. How does this contrast with [deficit-based community development](#)?
6. How can you balance initiative with humility in community engagement?
7. How can you demonstrate respect without being passive or disengaged? What might characterize authentic partnership?
8. How might you have gone about this process differently in this scenario? What might be the first next step?
9. How might you go about making amends once harm is caused?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- CHALLENGE NARRATIVES. Highlight underlying beliefs that helping is always beneficial, or that outside volunteers know what’s needed. Top-down thinking and saviorism are often built into the structures or service students have engaged in in the past.
- EXPLORE POWER DYNAMICS. Community engaged work is often fraught with imbalances and power dynamics around position and privilege. Students need a framework for grappling with this reality and how to take action within it.
- BE COMMUNITY LED. Explore the importance of consultation and listening before acting. Students need support in thinking about practical ways to place communities in the leading role in their own development.
- EXPLORE ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT. Using the resources linked, explore examples of asset-based practices: walking the space with a resident, joining an existing effort, asking about community priorities, etc.
- HONOR AGENCY. Help students consider the role and importance of trust-building and respecting community agency.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What’s one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- What does healthy initiative look like? Have you seen this in your past experiences?
- Who gets to decide what help looks like? Who holds knowledge or expertise in this setting?