

15. Community Organizing

“The great social justice changes in our country have happened when people came together, organized, and took direct action. It is this right that sustains and nurtures our democracy today. The civil rights movement, the labor movement, the women’s movement, and the equality movement of our LGBT brothers and sisters are all manifestations of these rights.”

— Dolores Huerta

CLP sites typically offer at least one full course on organizing – the theory and practice of various approaches to organizing people for collective action on issues they care about. These approaches include community organizing, movement building, nonviolent action, popular education, organizing to influence public policy, building unions, movements and coalitions, and registering and mobilizing voters. These courses introduce students to these strategies for community and social change, and to the skills and knowledge they will need to increase public engagement in influencing the social, economic and political institutions and policies which affect them.

There are a many different approaches to learning organizing. Most people learn it on the job, through trial and error, hopefully with good supervision and mentoring. Others learn it through practitioner training programs, and still others learn about organizing in academic settings. Relatively few people have had an opportunity to learn organizing and related topics through a combination of experiential learning, reflection, reading, and group discussion and practice – the combination CLP programs strive to provide.

There are also many schools of thought about what people should learn in an initial course in community organizing. Some stress hard skills, others what can be learned from history and theory. Many mix the two. Finally, they vary in how

they address issues of race, class, power and privilege, how much they emphasize policy and institutional change, and what approaches to collective action they favor.

Since any single course can only cover a limited number of these topics, it is vital to develop a longer curriculum which offers several interrelated courses and provides plenty of time to introduce, apply, and reflect on the many different areas of knowledge and skills which someone must master over time to become a highly effective agent of community change. That is why it's so valuable for students to eventually also take an advanced course in organizing during which they can deepen their understanding and broaden their skill-set. It's also why CLP faculty members and guest speakers keep reinforcing organizing strategies and skill development in all their CCS courses.

What Do Organizers Do? What Skills and Knowledge Do They Need?

“We urgently need to bring to our communities the limitless capacity to love, serve and create for and with each other. We urgently need to bring the neighbor back into our hoods, not only in our inner cities, but also in our suburbs, our gated communities, on Main Street and Wall Street, and on Ivy League campuses.”

— Grace Lee Boggs

In its publication Profile of a Community Organizer, CLP developed the following chart on the skills organizers need to carry out their main roles.

SKILLS OF ORGANIZERS

Skills Ability to perform tasks with a high degree of proficiency*	Find and Build a Base	Train, Support and Educate Leaders	Identify Issues	Move the Base to Action through Strategic Campaigns	Build Organizational Power
Active listening	●	●	●	●	●
Verbal communication	●	●	●	●	●
Culturally competent and aware (of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability)	●	●	●	●	●
Able to recognize strengths and weaknesses of different people in building a team		●		●	
Able to prioritize and implement a work plan	●	●	●	●	●
Critical thinking	●	●	●	●	●
Time management	●	●	●	●	●
Social - emotional intelligent leadership/organizing skills	●	●	●	●	●
Prioritizing and being organized	●	●	●	●	●
Facilitation	●	●	●	●	●
Agitation	●	●	●	●	●
Able to analyze causes and sources of inequity			●		●
Able to multi-task	●	●	●	●	●
Able to find answers			●	●	

*Skills are the ability to perform occupational tasks with a high degree of proficiency. Organizers require a range of skills, from basic to interpersonal to organizational. The following are the skills of organizers, from Most Important to Least Important, as ranked on our national survey.

From: Listening-Building-Making Change: Job Profile of a Community Organizer from CLP

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Skills Ability to perform tasks with a high degree of proficiency*	Find and Build a Base	Train, Support and Educate Leaders	Identify Issues	Move the Base to Action through Strategic Campaigns	Build Organizational Power
Know when to end a campaign, project or to close down your organization				●	●
Delegate tasks and responsibilities	●	●	●	●	●
Writing, such as professional e-mail and basic reports			●	●	●
Using a computer	●	●	●	●	●
Negotiating/arbitrating			●	●	
Multilingual speaking, writing, translating	●	●	●	●	
Phone answering	●	●	●	●	●
Writing reports, such as policy reports			●	●	●
Using Basic Office software: Excel/Power Point/ Quick Books			●	●	●
Using social media/social networking	●		●	●	
Marketing					●
Using GIS			●		
Video/film production					●

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The Western Organization of Resource Council's leaflet on "How to Understand the Role of a Community Organizer" provides an excellent background for

planning an introductory course on Community Organizing. It should be noted, however, that many organizations prepare volunteer leaders to take on several of the responsibilities which WORC enumerates. This lessens the load on staff and deepens the responsibilities, skills and power of the volunteer leadership.

“What do community organizers do? The short answer is that they **get people to work together to solve their own problems and change the world for the better.**

Some liken the role of a community organizer to that of the coach of an athletic team, in that it is the organizer’s job to get other people to take the lead. Others say that an organizer builds community with a purpose. Still others define an organizer as someone who **“builds a group of people or institutions to address a common problem through collective action.”**

“Here is a more detailed description of the role and responsibilities of a paid community organizer in a grassroots membership-based organization like those that make up WORC.

“Organizers build organizations that maximize the power and participation of their members. Their role is to see that the people and structures are in place to create coherence and integrity within an organization. Organizers are responsible for expanding the membership base, maintaining a focus on action, and preserving democratic, participatory structures and processes.

“Organizers build relationships, especially within the organization. The main tool for building such relationships is face-to-face conversations (often called a “one on one”), listening, sharing, discovering self-interests, building trust, and moving people to involvement.

“Organizers listen to their members who know the community, and let people go at their own pace while also helping them develop the self-confidence to try new things.

“In community organizations, decision-making is vested in the members. Big decisions should be made by as many members as possible. **Organizers are responsible for sharing information and raising questions, options, alternatives and problems that affect the collective power the group can wield.**

“Organizers do their fair share of the work, while also striving never to do for others what they can do for themselves. In other words, **organizers work with, not for, their members.**

“Empowered individuals speak for themselves. **Organizers identify and develop a diverse group of members who agree to serve as the organization’s public voice on a variety of issues.**

“**Organizers are attuned to the power relationships and political agendas surrounding an issue,** and analyze the social, political and economic forces that shape our communities, states, nation and world. **Organizers work with leaders to develop sound organizing strategies based on this power analysis.**

“**Organizers recruit and develop leaders,** seek to discover the skills, talents, and interests of current and potential leaders, and encourage shared leadership. They believe that everyone has the potential to lead if given the opportunity.

“**Another role of the organizer is to work with people to define problems and issues, and help them think through the strategies and tactics necessary to act with confidence and win.**

“**Organizers recruit members, assist with fundraising, and integrate fundraising into every aspect of their organizing work.** Organizers try to build an organization that is not dependent on outside funds.

“Community organizations are schools for civic participation and personal growth. Good organizers see the essence of their work as developing in local leaders the talents and gifts they have. **Organizers ensure that their members receive a consistently high standard of appropriate and effective training.**

“One of the primary tools of organizers is an effective meeting. **Organizers enable the members to hold meetings that are productive and focused.**

“Organizers facilitate training and strategy sessions when needed to help their members and leaders learn the skills they need to speak for the group, make good decisions and take the out-front roles. Organizers don’t run meetings where members are making decisions.

“Organizing is “on the job training,” and evaluations are an important way we learn from our experiences. **Organizers build evaluations into all aspects of their work.**

“Accountability means people can count on one another to keep commitments and agreements. **Organizers strive to be accountable and hold others accountable. Organizers create a culture that encourages people to commit only to things they can really do, and to know they are accountable for their actions**

“Organizers strive to reflect on and improve their skills on an ongoing basis, and develop an annual self-development plan.

“An organizer must be comfortable knowing that s/he will be in the background and that when recognition for his/her work comes, it’s from the members and leaders of the organization, not the press or the public. Many veteran organizers say that the respect of their members is a great reward and the reason why they stay in organizing.”

As mentioned, one striking finding from CLP’s research is that there are a surprising number of creative undergraduate courses and placement opportunities which individual faculty members have developed on issues related to social and community change.

One example is at Harvard where undergrads can take an excellent course on Community Organizing by Marshall Ganz, an Associate Professor at the Kennedy School and former Director of Organizing for the United Farmworkers Union. They can join graduate students at the Kennedy School, postgrads from nearby universities, and community organizers and other practitioners from outside academia.

As an expert trainer as well as educator, Ganz has created a course which seamlessly interweaves theoretical and experiential education. It includes extensive readings from such intellectual and philosophical leaders as Plato, deTocqueville and Arendt, and such community organizing pioneers as Alinsky, Ross, Baker, Chavez and Wiley. Ganz involves students in devising and launching organizing campaigns around issues the students select as they work with existing groups or create new ones to pursue systemic change. Field experiences included organizing residents of subsidized housing, organizing non-unionized university employees and launching a campaign to reverse current Presbyterian church policy concerning the ordination of gays and lesbians.

The entire course is designed like a training program for organizers in the “real world.” Students are screened to identify those who have the passion and motivation to be good organizers. The curriculum includes education on such key organizing techniques as conducting “one on one” interviews to surface people’s concerns, create relationships and identify potential leaders and bringing people together to discuss the issues they share and plan campaigns to address them. Each section leader is trained to give special attention to particularly promising potential organizers as the course proceeds.

Students develop their skills in critical reflection and strengthen their practice by reflecting weekly on-line on their organizing experiences and discuss these issues with their peers and section leaders during weekly seminars. *They also share their victories and defeats, looking for constructive feedback from which they can learn.* Like real community organizers, they learn and are toughened through forthright critiques by their peers and instructors. These include sharper criticism than is common in the academic world but which organizers (and law professors) have found to be effective in pushing people to strengthen their analysis, planning and actions. Students end the year with a thorough assessment of their experience and learning.

This course has been replicated at several colleges and Ganz wants to see it replicated, with appropriate adjustments, at many other colleges across the country. He therefore has developed unusually detailed course materials and made them accessible to others on the web. Ganz also has given special attention to selecting and training his Teaching Assistants so they will be fully prepared to teach the course elsewhere in the future, and has created a listserv linking his

former students together to stimulate continuing interest in organizing. His course is, however, not intended to prepare people for careers in organizing and community leadership.

With the WORC job description in mind, the following learning goals should guide planning for the Community Organizing course. Bear in mind that volunteer leaders may very well be taking this and other courses, and that the learning goals, teaching, and topics should be adjusted to fit their needs and roles.

Possible Learning Goals for a CO 101 Course:

- Creating a learning community with strong relationships, a sense of excitement about learning together, and a growing interest in Community Change Studies.
- Introducing students to the basic concepts of community organizing as a strategy for community and social change.
- Introducing students to organizing's historic role, its roots in various cultures and its importance today.
- Introducing students to different approaches to community organizing, including those based on neighborhoods, congregations, culture, race, workplace, gender, identity, and a common issue.
- Enabling students to begin learning the set of skills which are central to effective organizing.
- Helping students decide whether to pursue further education, experience, careers and leadership roles in community organizing and change.

CLP's website www.clpclp.org has an extensive set of useful materials on curricula on Community Organizing including syllabi and related training materials. They include materials developed by CLP sites, Marshall Ganz and experienced organizers who authored books on neighborhood and culture-based organizing. Many other syllabi are available at www.comm.org, the excellent web-site developed over many years by Randy Stoecker which features the course outlines for several different undergraduate courses in organizing, helping faculty identify topics and readings which may be useful when they plan their own courses.

Those materials have great similarities as well as differences. All of them cover the following –

- Vision and values which are behind change efforts; philosophy and world-view.
- Knowledge-development
 - The social, economic and political conditions which lead to organizing and social change.
 - History and theory of "community organizing", movement-building, community development and services, and other strategies for bringing about change.
 - Different forms of community participation -- community organizing, community development, community-led social services, citizen participation, and social movements.
 - Race, culture, and community organizing.
 - Alternative models and strategies for organizing.
- Skill-development
 - One on ones, story-telling and building initial relationships.
 - Understanding the community where you'll be organizing.
 - Working with groups; group facilitation; helping them make joint decisions and plans.
 - Building relationships in the community.
 - Developing leaders and popular education; the "iron rule" of organizing.
 - Analyzing issues and power analysis; thinking through a campaign to advance an issue.
 - Moving people into action.
 - Reflective practice -- Planning, action, reflection.
 - Developing and researching issues.
 - All the courses include experiential education in class and on campus in developing strategies and skills for organizing collective efforts to have an impact on an issue.
 - When feasible, the courses include experience off campus observing and/or participating in community organizing and change efforts.
- Exposure to pathways to various careers for using your knowledge and skills to foster community and social change.

A note about the organizer's role in community leadership development: Some organizations see the **development of community leaders as absolutely central**

to their mission, and a responsibility to which staff organizers should devote substantial time. Others are not as serious about that responsibility, or focus on their other roles and give little time to developing the knowledge, skills, and vision of their groups' volunteer leaders. It's a very tough balancing act.

Tools for Radical Democracy by Joan Minieri and Paul Getsos has an excellent chapter on "Developing Leaders from All Walks of Life." It begins by describing why leadership development is so important.

"Leadership development is a strategic and deliberate effort to educate and train members to strengthen their skills so they can apply these skills to campaigns and the work of the organization. Leadership development gives members the knowledge and skills to run their organizations effectively, hold staff accountable, and manage campaigns that address the issues they care about."

In describing leadership development practices at Community Voices Heard, the organization they co-founded, Minieri and Getsos stress the advantages of developing many leaders and continually grooming new people to join the leadership. "**Sharing power.** Leaders rotate through different roles. They practice working in teams. They step aside at times or challenge themselves to take on new forms of leadership so that emerging leaders can play key roles. Power-sharing also prevents individual leaders from taking on too much and burning out."

Minieri and Getsos conclude with several useful tools and detailed advice about developing emerging leaders, including leadership prep, civics education, education about social movements and history, and training in the organization's mission, history and culture.

"There goes my people. I must follow them, for I am their leader."

— George Wiley,
Founder of National Welfare Rights Organization
