

## INTERVIEW

with Susan Ostrander, PhD, Department of Anthropology and Sociology

We want to call your attention to the last TUCS interview of the academic year with Susan Ostrander from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. Susan talked to us about her community collaborative and active citizenship scholarship. Her path of study and practice - from nursing to professor of sociology - is fascinating, and exemplifies ways direct experience with individuals can inform broader thinking for community and policy development. It's a must read!

LW: First of all, could you please tell us a little about your background and how your academic interests developed?

SO: Well, I'm a Sociologist. Right out of high school I trained to become a registered nurse. I grew up in a working class Irish catholic family where if girls had paid jobs, they had three choices: nuns, teachers of small children, or nurses. I worked for a while as a psychiatric nurse, and I kept asking what I later realized were sociological questions - like, "maybe the reason this man is so depressed is because he has this really awful job where he's not respected..." and the psychiatrists would look at me like maybe I wasn't so mentally healthy myself!! I was also studying then to become a psychiatric nurse instructor, and I took a sociology course where I discovered a whole field of a people who think like this, who ask these same kinds of strange questions that emphasize the situation the person is in to explain behavior. I realized I could actually get paid to teach Sociology and do sociological research. So, that was it and I went to graduate school in Sociology.

LW: What drew you to the work that you do? What are the highlights of your history of development in sociological thought - perhaps starting with a broad view, and then honing in on civic engagement research and your work with communities, kids and families?

SO: I do a lot of different kinds of work, but I've always been most interested in socio-economic class and other forms of social inequality, and in building social justice. Class issues were very important in my family. My uncles had jobs like sheet metal worker, and typesetter, and airplane mechanic, and it seemed one of them was always on strike. They were always telling one of my aunts who worked as a nurse that nurses should unionize - which now of course they have. I grew up in a college town where my family was an old, well known family with a road named after us, but we were known for things like my great-grandfather being the much-loved head custodian staff at the local college. As a child, I played with the professors' children, but I was never invited to their parties, and it was really clear that it was because I was not of the right class. For a variety of reasons, I think that drove my interests. A turning point was in high school, when I had a boyfriend who was of the upper class. He invited me to a country club dance and was told by the organizers that I was not acceptable enough to come. By that time, I'd tired of this boyfriend so I wasn't heartbroken, but I became fascinated that there was this whole class system that I was vaguely aware of. Later, when I became a sociologist, I just knew that

this was what I was going to do with my work, to figure this out. So, I think all of my work is related to issues of class, race, gender, and social inequality. I wrote about some of this in a book called *Our Studies, Our Selves*. The editors asked several sociologists to write a piece about how some aspect of our own history shaped the work that we do now, and I wrote about what I just told you, about why I study class.

LW: How did you get interested in communities? What was the process that went from class and social justice and gender, to communities?

SO: Well, first of all it's always been really clear to me that the way progressive social change ----- change that leads to greater social equality -- happens is because people at the bottom of the class structure or some other structure organize and make it happen. I think that's true whether it's labor unions or civil rights or gay and lesbian rights. The people who don't have are the ones who are going to want to fix things. It's good to have allies at the top that work with you, but I've always believed that change came from the bottom. So, if I was going to be part of creating that change, I'd knew I'd try to use my skills as a sociologist - both as a teacher and a researcher - to explain why there is so much social inequality in a society that has so many resources to share, and to figure out how to change it. For me, that increasingly came to mean working particularly with low income communities, because that is where change starts. It can't end there, but that is where it starts.

LW: How did you start? Where did you find a community, and what issues were you focusing on - the change process itself?

SO: Well, there's really not anything new about this kind of work in Sociology or in my life. It gets framed now in different language -- civically engaged scholarship, teaching for active citizenship. My very first job out of graduate school was at an applied social science research center at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. We were hired to work with community organizations and state and city governments to plan and evaluate social welfare policies and programs, to do neighborhood empowerment projects, and other kinds of what we might now call civic engagement research. Sociologists have always done this kind of applied work. We've always done community based research, participatory research. Right now all this is becoming hot stuff again with the new language of civic engagement and community collaboratives and campus-community partnerships, and that's very exciting for me and other people who want to work this way.

In terms of my teaching, I started fifteen years ago at Tufts to offer students the option of doing community projects in my classes. When my students would say, "ok, we get it, there's a lot of social inequality and we get why...now we want to do something," I decided there had to be some hands-on experience. If I'm teaching about social inequality and then not providing an opportunity for action, people just end up feeling hopeless and paralyzed and overwhelmed, and that's not contributing to change or to good learning.

I started learning about some of the community organizations in Somerville, which seems like my community since it's where I work and it seems to be the place where the work should be happening. I started meeting with some community organizations and talking to the people about what they do and whether they would be interested in having students work there. I talked to the Community Action Agency of Somerville, various teen shelters, settlement houses, and community development organizations. Somerville has a wealth of community organizations, so it just depended on which ones were interested and where I thought there could be a good match between students making a contribution and having a positive learning experience. I did want my students to be doing work that was more about building the capacity of those organizations to create some sort of lasting change. Work in soup kitchens and homeless shelters is very important and saves people's lives, but when I'm working with students in a classroom where part of the work is to analyze why these kinds of organizations are needed in first place and what kind of society we need to create so we don't need to have soup kitchens and homeless shelters, then I want students to be doing a deeper kind of work and thinking about it in deeper way.

LW: Could you describe the deeper work?

SO: Let's take the example of the Somerville Community Corps in Davis Square. One of the things that they do is, like most community development corporations, they build affordable housing. That's good. It meets people's immediate needs. But, they're also doing grassroots community organizing which means empowering people who live in local neighborhoods in Somerville to have some voice and some control over what their neighborhoods going to look like. That's what we now talk about as active citizenship and civic engagement. I have one student from my Wealth, Poverty, and Inequalities (Sociology 130) class who's doing the hard, day-to-day, door knocking that community organizers do. They're knocking on doors in particular neighborhoods in Somerville to see what issues are important to the people. Eventually, there will be a community meeting and some kind of organizing campaign to address those issues in the city. So that's an example of that "deeper" kind of work.

LW: This kind of leads into the CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH GROUP (CERG) that you and Kent Portney started. Could you talk a little about that, and also the impact of interdisciplinary work on that process?

SO: Probably for about ten years, I felt the need for a group of fellow researchers at Tufts to talk with about the kinds of scholarship I'm interested in -- other faculty at Tufts who do civic engagement research and/or have students doing it. I've wanted for a long time to build some sort of intellectual community, to have a place to talk about our work in progress, to build relationships. I thought about that for a long time, and I talked with Rob Hollister about it, and tried to figure out how to make this happen. For a variety of reasons, it just didn't feel like the right time until the past few years when the University College for Citizenship and Public Service really took off.

A couple years ago, I approached Rob and said, "I want to do this now," and he said great, I think we're ready. My wanting to start CERG - pronounced "surge"-- was also profoundly influenced by research I did in the summer of 2001 when I traveled around the United States and visited five colleges and universities who had model civic engagement initiatives going on. The full report of that project is on the University College website, plus in a subsequent article I published last year in a journal called *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. The first of many things that I learned out of that project was that universities and colleges today are being called to account for why they should exist, why they cost so much, why they should be tax exempt if they are not serving the public good as tax exempt status requires, and what are they really contributing to society beyond educating our students to have a comfortable and fulfilling life, which is just not enough. I also learned that some colleges and universities have tried to respond to this by developing civic engagement/active citizenship initiatives that focused pretty exclusively on students.

While that emphasis does address one part of the issue, it seemed to me and to lots of people I talked with at other schools, not the way to go because it does not incorporate the whole public purpose of higher education. It leaves out the development of new knowledge. Focusing only on students cannot involve faculty in any sustained way because, like I always say, teaching is half my job (and a very important half!) but the other half of my job, and the job of a university, is to create new knowledge. I like to ask my students, "Don't you wonder who writes these books and articles that we read in class? I couldn't teach this class and you couldn't learn without them - so who writes them?" They usually say "writers" write them, and I say no, your professors write them, and that's the other half of our job. Most of our students don't know that, and the reason why they don't know that is because most of us don't tell them that it's the job of a university to produce new knowledge in addition to passing on that knowledge. To answer the question of what the academy and we as academics are contributing and why we deserve to exist as important institutions in society, we need to be creating knowledge that is relevant, that's useful, and that has something to say about the most important issues of the day. I don't mean that all the research we do has to be of the immediate applied nature of the kind I did in my first job -- but if we're producing good high quality scholarship it seems to me it needs to emerge from and be connected back in some way to what is actually going on around us and to what people in societies and communities around us are facing in their daily lives.

I just decided we were going to do this, to start a study group with the faculty at Tufts who are interested in this stuff, so I asked Kent Portney in Political Science to work with me and we picked out people we knew at Tufts who were doing this kind of work and called the first meeting to see what would happen. I knew that Kent had done work with Jeff Berry about neighborhood civic engagement. In March 2003, we had the first meeting. About 15 people showed up. We wanted it to be a small group, because we wanted the focus to be intense. We've been meeting every month since.

This semester, we started inviting outside speakers from around the Boston area -- other researchers - to present their work, and we're also including local community activists

and community practitioners, as well as advanced students doing civic engagement research. I'm very excited about expanding the group in this way. At the March meeting, a scholar from MIT who studies civic environmentalism (Judith Layzer) presented her research, and people from the local Mystic River Watershed Project like Nancy Hammet were there too, as well as a group of UEP students studying ethical issues and the environment. It really sparks a conversation to have people doing research around some issue in the room, people on the front lines doing activism, and students reading the hot new theory. That kind of conversation also happened at the February CERG meeting, where a faculty member from Brandeis (Carmen Sirianni) presented his research on citywide youth engagement, and one of the participants from the community was Stanley Pollard who heads up a group called Teen Empowerment.

LW: What happened after this exciting conversation? Are there going to be next steps from it?

SO: Kent and I are co-editing a book, which will have chapters from eight or ten researchers at Tufts who have participated in the group. The first goal, which I think we've achieved, was to solidify this intellectual community and expand it to include community practitioners. I'm not sure what's going to happen next. It may be that this is enough for the time being. It's feeding each of our work, and creating new relationships among Tufts faculty across departments and schools, and between community people and researchers.

One goal for the group has been that eventually some set of shared questions or issues will emerge, and we might end up doing some joint projects together. It felt to me that happened especially at the March CERG meeting when Layzer posed the question from her research: "Is civic engagement good for the environment?" There is this assumption that if more people become civically engaged that will lead to a better world - one that is socially more equitable. I think we don't know if that's actually always true. You could say that in a democratic society, active citizenship and civic engagement is important in and of itself. We don't have a democracy if people aren't engaged. Still, I want to ask the question: if more people are civically engaged, is it going to create a better world, a more just and equitable world? Layzer was asking a question like that about the environment. She had examples from her research of campaigns where the more people got civically involved, the more difficult it was to develop progressive environmental policies; and she had examples where the more people were engaged, the easier it was to develop policies. So, the point is that it depends!! Who is it who are civically engaged and what is it that they're trying to accomplish? So it seems to me that's a question that in one way or another, all of us in CERG are looking at or could be looking at: what kinds of civic engagement and under what conditions contribute to creating a more equitable world? I don't know the answer to that question, and I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question. Whether you're studying the environment or economic equity or housing or health or child development - whatever your interest in civic engagement is, you want to know what kinds of civic engagement under what conditions will create a more just and equitable world. That felt like a very important moment to me.

Personally for me, to have an ongoing study group for people to meet and talk about our work, to create connections with people maybe we weren't connected to before, to have someone take a look at and critique a manuscript that you're writing - that wasn't happening so much before and maybe it's enough for now. We talk a lot about intellectual community at Tufts, but in my experience there isn't much intellectual community. We're all kind of off doing our own thing, and there's not enough coming together to have the kinds of conversations around intellectual questions that people outside the academy think we have all the time. But I also understand that study groups don't go on forever, and to sustain itself, CERG will have to periodically remake itself to meet new needs and interests. I think we can do that.

LW: How many disciplines do you figure are involved in the group?

SO: It is kind of a shifting group, depending on the topics. Then there is this sort of core group of people and disciplines that come pretty regularly. Among the regulars are people from Political Science, Sociology, Child Development, Public Health, UEP, Peace and Justice Studies, American Studies, Education, History and Computer Science and Engineering sometimes. Then there's staff from University College, particularly community partner people like Lisa Brukilacchio and Shirley Mark. It's mostly social sciences, and we're thinking about how to interest more Humanities faculty, but I hear they may be in the process of pulling themselves together in some other way and we hope we can connect at some point

Part of what has made me feel that now there's a lot of support from the university for something like CERG and for those of us that are doing civic engagement scholarship is that President Bacow has chosen these four fantastic core themes to define what Tufts is. Again, it's like you wake up in the morning and this thing that you've been doing in your career for the past 25 years - suddenly the President of the university is saying civic engagement is one of our major identifying themes. The strategic planning committee who's doing work around these four core themes had a really exciting open panel on all these themes, and one of them was on civic engagement scholarship. Many of them did not know about the existence of the Civic Engagement Research Group, so they were saying tell us all about it. It is like one of those things that goes on for a long time, and then all of a sudden it catches. So this is a very exciting moment, and Rob and University College has certainly been both a driver in and caught up in that momentum.

As you know, President Bacow and Provost Bharucha are also committed to students being involved in faculty research, which is a natural for those of us who do both civically engaged teaching and research. A lot of what's happened supports the civic engagement scholarship piece is now coming down from Ballou. It's about making Tufts even better, raising the bar, making high quality scholarship an even more important part of our mission. It's a very good moment to be doing this work.

LW: Could you talk about some of the community and equity issues around kids and families?

SO: A number of the kinds of civic engagement projects that my students do involve youth in one way or another. For example, right now I teach a course called Urban Community Organizing (Sociology 149A). We are about to embark on a project in the next few weeks with an organization in Somerville called The Welcome Project, which is an immigrants' rights and tenant's rights organization that resides in the Mystic Public Housing Development in Somerville. I've been working with The Welcome Project for probably seven or eight years. We're about to do an initiative with Somerville High School students who live in public housing --- and are therefore very low income kids - aimed at addressing some of the barriers that these high school students face to making life decisions about education after high school. For some of those kids, that could be about wanting to go to Tufts and how do they get themselves through the application process. For others, it could be about not being sure if college is for them, and what are their other educational options? We don't know exactly what it's going to be yet because good organizing practice has the people most affected defining the agenda and we've not had the meetings with the high school students yet.

I only have five students in my organizing class, but it needs to be limited to a small group because it will be very intense work. The plan is for me and these five students to meet with a group of Somerville High School students who live in the Mystic Public Housing Development four times. The first meeting will be about relationship building; to talk about what the high school students are thinking about doing, what are their plans, their ideas, their questions, their fears; what kind of help are they getting or will need. The second meeting will be about some of the changes that a Somerville high school student who lives in public housing needs. What are some institutionalized practices that the high school or community or city or some larger institution could be providing that would alleviate some of these barriers. Some of it is the individual mentoring and one-on-one work -and a couple of students from my other class, the one on social inequalities, are doing that part of the work -- but this is an organizing course. It's got to be about what kind of social change needs to happen - in the community, in the school, in community organizations - that would be helpful. Take for example the activity center at the Mystic housing development. It may be less intimidating for the high school students if they could have a college fair at the activity center, where all the local colleges and universities would come for a day to set up a booth and talk to the students about their school plans. This group would decide to make that an organizing project, to make that college fair happen. So that's an example of a service project that's connected to Somerville youth.

At some point you hope that with the service work, that the students will say, "Why are these kids having so much trouble? Why do they need me to be a mentor so badly? When I was in high school, I didn't need this kind of help." Then hopefully something will click in their head, and they'll realize that maybe there's something going on, that maybe there's something that the schools or the institutions or the community's not doing, and that will need to be addressed on an institutional level - and that's what good community organizers do.