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Hard Times in D.C.

In the nation's capital, Illinois Wesleyan students get a firsthand glimpse of poverty in America.

By Greg Shaw, Illinois Wesleyan Assistant Professor of Political Science

The dozen students who signed up for my 2002 May Term course, “Finding Work and a Place to Live,” knew upfront that their experiences would lead them far beyond the traditional classroom encounters. In a course designed to prompt insights on issues surrounding low-income housing, homelessness, and welfare-to-work programs, it was important to give students a firsthand glimpse into the lives of America’s poor. Toward that end, our accommodations during a two-week stay in Washington, D.C., were at the city’s largest homeless shelter, run by the non-profit group Community for Creative Non-Violence.



The class (above) posed for a group portrait on their way to the Capitol, where they met with public-policy experts who offered facts, but no clear solutions, on problems faced by the nation's poor. (Photo by Greg Shaw)

The shelter provided us with a secure room of bunk beds, and showers and a kitchen down the hall in the staff wing of the building. That this temporary home sat one block from the Hyatt Regency and about a half dozen blocks from the Capitol posed an irony that just wouldn't quit. That this many people—about 850 on a typical night—are housed for up to six months at a time in the shadow of the offices of this country's most important decision-makers, with no permanent solutions in sight, disturbed the students profoundly. At the same time, for the shelter's homeless residents, this was far better than living out on the streets—as our group from Illinois Wesleyan was about to find out.

Although students knew in advance that they would be lodging in the shelter, I deliberately kept secret my plans for their first full day in Washington. That day began as the twang of Garth Brooks awakened the students slumbering in their beds. I cranked the volume of a tape player cued to a song by the country singer that I hoped would capture the spirit of the task before them. The song's lyrics urge people not to spend their lives comfortably standing outside the fire. Instead, Brooks invites them to risk a little to live a larger life.

The message behind those lyrics didn't set in until after breakfast, when I revealed to the students exactly what I had in mind. The plan called for them to shed all their security blankets—backpacks, wallets, credit cards, cell phones, bus passes, and most everything else that normally falls into the category of “necessities”—and to survive on the streets of Washington for 12 hours.

But they had to do more than survive. In small groups they had to locate and interview staff members at social service agencies that could provide them with a change of clothes, food, medical care, and a place to stay. In scavenger-hunt fashion, they had to photograph a few sites located beyond what are normally considered comfortable walking distances. Coming up with a presentable resume and landing a job turned out to be nearly impossible. The single dollar bill they each set out with wasn't much help. The pencils, street maps, and disposable cameras didn't make things any more comfortable either.

By the end of the day they had learned about much more than the range of social services in the nation's capital. While enduring hunger, sunburns, exhaustion, and rejection, they had come to know new things about themselves and each other. After a hot meal and a good night's sleep, the lessons of the day sunk in. They had seen, as one student later wrote in a journal, that most people are "incredibly naïve when it comes to what those in poverty experience every day." Another commented that those 12 hours on the street actually helped her affirm what she wants to do with her life, assisting others in need.

My intention in arranging this eye-opening experience was to provide these students with a glimpse of everyday challenges faced by the poor and homeless. Living in a homeless shelter during their stay in D.C. would also encourage a lot of personal contact with the poor, enhancing that perspective. Within this context, the students spent their remaining two weeks in Washington interviewing partisan and non-partisan experts about low-income housing policies and the 2002 reauthorization of the principal federal welfare law. Congressional staff members shared their bosses' perspectives on the substance of the policy debates as well as the strategic side of the political process behind welfare policy-making. A pair of researchers at the Urban Institute, a Washington-based think tank, and two more at the Congressional Research Service, Congress's own research organization, provided all the factual information the students could ask for and digest, and more.

Ensuring lively debates, many stretching late into the evenings, the students heard from ideologues on both sides of the political spectrum. A bit frustrated with what he took to be the students' narrow questions, our host at the conservative Heritage Foundation implored them to see his view of the larger picture: there is simply no way to provide public assistance without also offering perverse incentives toward dependency. Abolishing all types of welfare is the answer, he maintained. Countering this view, a low-income housing advocate, incredulous that some of the students insisted on purely market-based strategies, argued that capitalism simply doesn't work. An 11-percent poverty rate (based on a federal poverty line that itself is arguably too low) and about a quarter-million homeless Americans stand as stark indictments of the status quo.

While the arguments frequently remained unsettled, a general consensus emerged, as one student wrote in a journal, that "I don't think that I will be happy in a career where I don't feel that I am making the world a better place, in at least some small way." Another observed that the more information one has, the more problematic absolute convictions become.

From Washington, we traveled to Chicago, where students spent the last week of the term visiting organizations that try to put federal policies into action at the local level. During their

time in Chicago, students had a chance to see federal housing and welfare programs up close and to witness the federal–local tensions that often develop, where one level of government talks past or in opposition to another.

While visiting with community-based agencies involved in welfare-to-work programs, the students gained an appreciation for the complexity of many poor people's problems. They learned that solving unemployment requires not only matching the right person to the right job, but also overcoming transportation, childcare, and health-related obstacles. While the D.C.-based policy specialists to whom they'd spoken commanded truly impressive knowledge regarding their area of expertise—housing, substance-abuse intervention, transportation issues, and so on—they often didn't think in terms of how those areas interacted, or failed to interact. Policies generated at the federal level can at times reflect this lack of coordination, resulting in inefficiencies and conflicts as those policies are acted out on the local level.

This same conflict between federal and local perspectives sets up another potential obstacle toward constructing effective public policy for poor people. Congress, with its legitimate penchant for insisting on significant control over where, how and on whom its dollars are spent, from time to time thwarts local initiatives. For their part, local agencies, embedded in local customs—including racism and other forms of discrimination—sometimes fail to act in ways that our national representative bodies would endorse. Therein lies the rub: How to strike a balance between national and local control and how to bring to bear the expertise that typically resides in Washington while properly appreciating the flexibility required by local agencies? In this sense, the two parts of this course revealed two very different worlds of social policy in the U.S.

If the students benefited from this diversity of experiences and time of self-exploration, they also taught a good deal—to their peers and to their instructor. Communal life on the road under somewhat adverse conditions had a way of knocking the usually polite polish off interpersonal relations. Together, the group cooked and washed dishes, spent time in racially divided neighborhoods, wrestled with controversial texts, and walked through frighteningly dilapidated public housing projects. Solid teamwork generally prevailed, but with long-held beliefs challenged daily, this was not an easy or comfortable course.

To say that teaching a course like this poses some unique challenges dramatically understates the case. Probably the most disturbing lesson I learned as the instructor was how difficult, if not impossible, it is to create learning opportunities through visits to poor neighborhoods and to do so in a way that remains sensitive both to the students and to the residents of those neighborhoods. Visiting Chicago's high-rise public housing projects without appearing as tourists proved problematic. At least one group of residents declined to meet with us because they did not want a bunch of mostly middle-class, white people studying them like specimens under a microscope. The volunteer coordinator at the Community for Creative Non-Violence challenged us to spend some real time (more than the three-week May Term allows) sitting and talking with the homeless if we wanted to begin to understand them. It's hard not to concede that what we did in our short time with them barely scratched the surface.

Despite these feelings of inadequacy, the countless informal learning experiences—a night spent sleeping with the general population at a shelter in Chicago, a trip to deliver packaged meals to the homeless in Washington, a morning spent helping a skilled but still unemployed man prepare a resume for a job he may never get—proved invaluable. As one student wrote in a journal, “I learned some of the most important lessons of the trip during the informal time when we were volunteering or visiting a site.” These are lessons you can’t achieve in a conventional classroom.

The strategy of surprising students from time to time seemed right. Learning is essentially about the wonder of exploration, and that requires a willingness to lay aside one’s preconceptions and assumptions. In our case, that meant laying aside our security blankets to step into the unknown. Taking risks to live a larger life was truly what this course was all about.



Greg Shaw (left) is assistant professor of political science at Illinois Wesleyan University. He teaches American social policy, Congress, the presidency, and public opinion, among other topics. (Photo by Marc Featherly)