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Feminist Social Justice Work: Moving Toward Solidarity

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Feminist Social Justice Work: Moving Toward Solidarity

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Abstract

This article analyzes grassroots, feminist, and Freirean community-organizing as platforms for community-based service-learning (CBSL) and human rights work. CBSL is conceptualized as alignment, a first step in the long haul of working with community members in a solidarity relationship to create social justice.

Keywords

Solidarity, Community-based Service-learning, Feminism, Human Rights, Grassroots Organizing

In this article, I discuss activist, Freire and feminist-inspired grassroots work as a foundation for community-based pedagogy and partnerships informed by a human rights framework. Such a position makes explicit the intersection of gender, race, and class oppression and conceptualizes student activism and CBSL as alignment - the first step in a solidarity process. I offer an accompaniment model for training undergraduate social science students, rooted in what Mies and Shiva (1993) outline as a radical, feminist process informed by a double consciousness. This involves a view from below, participation in advocacy, movements and struggles, challenge of the status quo, collective consciousness-raising, and an ethics of social justice. I begin by tracing my grassroots organizing on reproductive freedom and discuss the evolution of that community organizing to classroom platforms with CBSL and research (CBR) components.

In each of the human rights arenas discussed—gender rights, economic justice, youth rights, indigenous rights, and the right to food—I note the development of courses and community-based research from long-term community involvement. Acting on feminism as a transformational politic seeking social justice leads not only to a series of challenges to structural violence, but also to a

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In each of the human rights arenas discussed—gender rights, economic justice, youth rights, indigenous rights, and the right to food—I note the development of courses and community-based research from long-term community involvement. Acting on feminism as a transformational politic seeking social justice leads not only to a series of challenges to structural violence, but also to a rethinking of conventional organizing techniques, classroom practices, campus-community relationships, and research methods. I do not subscribe to the oppositional model of women-centered organizing vs. Alinksy-style described by Stoecker and Stall 1997. I share a view of civic engagement

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that sees university participation as one element in a broad-based effort for the benefit of the entire community. The involvement of faculty and students follows a community-led direction, of which the university community is only one participant. Student and faculty involvement occur in response to the large agenda by a diverse coalition, rather than by a faculty member's class or scholarship interests (Stoecker and Beckman 2010).

Figure 1. Solidarity Continuum (O'Donnell 2010)

Moving Toward Solidarity

Programs which offer community-based training to students are embedded in and shaped by complex power relationships, a principal one being the nature of the relationship between the university and the community. In contrast to the charity or entrepreneurial models that are often used by academics, NGOs, and others, I utilize the notion of a solidarity relationship which Freire (1970) recognized as involving praxis, education for the liberation for all parties, and the transformation of oppressive conditions. Fraser (1986; Waterman 1996) refers to a similar stance as solidarity ethics. Both call for taking our cues from the community with our bottom lines addressing structural issues reflecting or associated with the root causes of disparities—poverty, food, sovereignty, political voice, and equity.

This approach also demands engaging ourselves in understanding the roots of the structural inequities that people confront globally and locally, and our own location in that system. Binford (1996: 203-3) describes 'practicing the preferential for the poor' as linking investigative human rights documentation work with grassroots organizations, public education which gives voice to witnesses and their resistance to oppression, and scrutiny of the institutions that are at the forefront of the so-called 'New World Order' contributing to attacks on social welfare and growing disparities in the North and the South alike.

Vandana Shiva's work with the Chipko movement and others in India also provides us with a feminist, community-based model geared toward sustainable living and social justice. Shiva and Mies

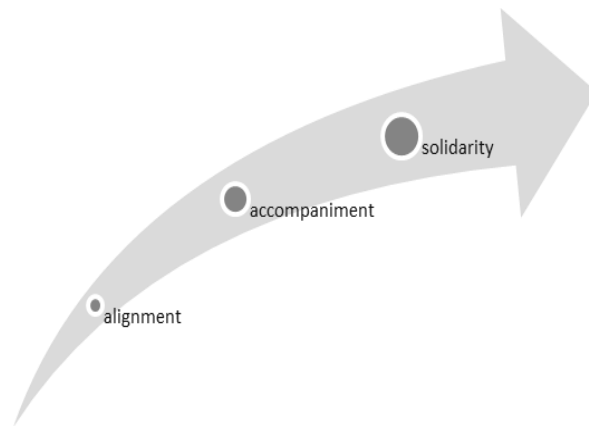
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rethinking of conventional organizing techniques, classroom practices, campus-community relationships, and research methods. I do not subscribe to the oppositional model of women-centered organizing vs. Alinsky-style described by Stoecker and Stall 1997. I share a view of civic engagement that sees university participation as one element in a broad-based effort for the benefit of the entire community. The involvement of faculty and students follows a community-led direction, of which the university community is only one participant. Student and faculty involvement occur in response to the large agenda by adverse coalition, rather than by a faculty member's class or scholarship interests (Stoecker and Beckman 2010).

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Vandana Shiva's work with the Chipko movement and others in India also provides us with a feminist, community-based model geared toward sustainable living and social justice. Shiva and Mies (1993: 303) outline 'a vision of non-exploitative, non-colonial, non-patriarchal society,' and a subsistence perspective which 'did not emanate from research institutes, UN organizations or governments but from grassroots movements in both the North and the South that fought and fight for survival.'

Connected Learning

Empowering students as active learners has always been a core, feminist pedagogical ideal (NWSA 1991: 13). This goal may manifest itself in classroom pedagogies which are socially-conscious and experientially-based with community activist projects which link theory and action. In addition to analysis, evaluation, and critique, students challenge systems that recreate oppressive, distorted, socio-cultural ideas and practices. This challenge takes place both within and outside the classroom. My grassroots community work on economic justice, women's rights, youth rights, reproductive rights, and indigenous rights led me to develop course platforms that foster critical pedagogy, student and community voice, and solidarity with the goal of 'social change for social justice' (Shiva 2003).

Building Activist Bridges on Reproductive Rights

In 1981, two students and I created a chapter of Delaware Otsego National Organization for Women (NOW) in the soil culti-

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vated by the community's first NOW. At the inaugural meeting of NOW's second chapter, we laid out several national NOW priorities - including reproductive freedom and the extension of the deadline for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)—while distributing materials on the ERA for a letter-writing directed at legislators. Networking with local college women's groups was a priority.

In the same year, I worked with students to change the campus 'Awareness Center' into a Women's Center at Hartwick College and became the new center's advisor. In the fall, I taught a course entitled Women and Social Change. NOW and the Women's Center collaborated on developing conferences, marches, rallies, and community events. Such collaborations between activists and feminist organizations on campus and in the community continued throughout the 1980s and 1990 and emerged in my classes in the form of community action teams doing activist work and research. By 1986, my course had become the first platform for my experimentation with community-based service-learning. I used familiar policy arenas and contacts and networks created through community organizing to inform the new pedagogical work.

By 1990, my second decade of campus community-organizing, I felt that that I needed to bring my head and heart together in work that integrated my political commitments and scholarship, a decision which led to six years of work in roles from tutor to lobbyist for farm workers' rights with the Migrant Tutorial Program, which advocated for white, working-class, dairy farm workers and their families. This marked the beginning of a long process of linking my activist work to pedagogy and research on women and rural poverty.

Two decades of political activism on reproductive freedom in the backyard of Randall Terry, founder of the militant anti-choice organization, Operation Rescue, sensitized me to the minefield of community sentiments that existed in rural, upstate, New York. The political climate of the 1980s and 1990s renewed and deepened my commitment to the reproductive rights movement. As a 'bridge person' (Stoecker 2002), I worked with the area Planned Parenthood in supporting rallies, inviting speakers, and lobbying government officials. From this experience, I created community-based service-learning groups at Head Start, Planned Parenthood, the Women In-

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fant and Children (WIC) Program, and the Violence Intervention Program (VIP) so that students could observe the intersection of class, race, and gender politics, along with the role of rights in defining socially just public policy. Student projects ranged from direct classroom work at Head Start to social movement mobilizing with Planned Parenthood, to staffing the local violence intervention hotline and safe house.

Later course platforms for community-based service-learning included Children's Lives, Teens and Families, Qualitative Methods, Weaving Solidarity: Fair Trade, Social Justice, and Human Rights, and Food and Social Justice, all of which first emerged in activist work with local or national organizations and community-based research and were later transformed into courses that engaged students in community-based initiatives. Initially in courses I used the concept of Praxis Groups and later, Community Action Teams (CATS), to create student group approaches to community work and research in major policy areas.

Partnering for Youth Rights

My CBSL courses have their roots in social movements and community-organizing, a developmental trajectory that Stoeker and Beckman (2010) advocate. Generally, the overall nature of the relationships in these courses is one of mutual engagement (Petras and Porpora 1993). College students and local teens have also engaged in community-based research with me. That research has emerged from the organizing and serves the purpose of identifying key problems and solving them. While I have conducted formal surveys to identify teen interests and community concerns, such scholarship as well as other reports, letters to the editor, public presentations, lectures, and grants informed by my research and academic training have been largely for the public arena. Conference presentations and publishing have taken a back seat to the demands of mobilization, management, and teaching.

Students who excelled at CBSL and possessed great capacity for forming and sustaining community partnerships later became interns and researchers who worked as staff at various organizations. Students have commented on a growing sense of community, recognition of community needs, increased sense of efficacy, clarification of

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career goals, and recognition of town-gown relationships and the politics of power.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, my emphasis is on creating community partnerships for social justice (Ward and Moore 2010); and CBSL offers an opportunity for students to align with community and social movement activists and community non-profit organizations (O'Donnell 2010). Accordingly, I embrace Holland's definition of engaged scholarship as 'a specific conception of faculty work that connects the intellectual assets of the institution (i.e. faculty expertise) to public issues such as community, social, cultural, human, and economic development. Through engaged forms of teaching and research, faculty apply their academic expertise to public purposes, as a way of contributing to the fulfillment of the core mission of the institution (quoted in Glass and Fitzgerald 2010: 15). In addition, I endorse Stoecker and Becker's insofar as it defines 'university participation as one element in a broad-based effort for the benefit of the entire community. The involvement of faculty and students follows a community-led direction, of which the university community is only one participant (Stoecker and Becker 2009: 11).

The work may be characterized as youth-led organizing in that it involves youth in decision-making, leadership development, goal-setting, skills-building, arts and culture, coalition-building, democratic practice, and community service (Delgado and Staples 2008). From this perspective, adults are allies. In the earlier phases of this mobilization, youth were more engaged in the political processes of lobbying, letter-writing, and petitioning. With the development of the non-profit organization and the teen center, youth leadership has moved more to programming and center activities.

Accompaniment: the Method of Solidarity

I characterize the solidarity relationship as a process involving alignment, consciousness raising, and trust building through accompaniment, collective action, practicing oppositional politics, networking, and solidarity. It begins with alignment - identifying oneself with an issue, a person, a movement, or an organization. This may have been preceded by a consciousness raising process which Freire describes as *conscientization*--the process of becoming aware of oppression in its social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions.

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It is my hope that community-based work in the Oneonta, New York and Chiapas, Mexico communities spark alignment. For some, working with the little children in Head Start makes them aware of poverty for the first time. Others see the impact of violence on families through work at the local domestic violence shelter and then learn of the same violence in Chiapas. Still others awaken through speakers, coursework, and mass mobilizations like the campaign to close the School of Americas. In 2006, after marching in Georgia, students returned to college and built a campus Wick Watch to recruit new members and to raise campus consciousness. Community-based activism and advocacy linked to coursework create the potential for four years of aligned work while in school and the accompanying research arms students with experience and knowledge for the next phase of their work.

Accompaniment—walking with one another through the process of mutual learning and deepening collective commitments - is the methodology used to understand and enact our community partnership relationships; it is supposed to be non-hierarchical. Accompaniment is based on trust and respect and allows greater trust to potentially develop. Such relationships involve high stakes, sensitive insider knowledge, and emotional attachment and thus can also produce deep hurt and injury (Stacey 1988). Accompaniment entails participant-activists (Nash 2007), as opposed to participant-observers. Mies (1993) identifies this as a stance of conscious partiality.

Since 1986, I have accompanied students in several different ways given local and global needs. A dominant strategy has been to develop comprehensive CBSL within a course, develop student teams to tackle community work (CATS), and devote one class period per week to allowing each community action team to present their field experiences to the class, exchange information, raise questions, and get feedback from me. In addition, I meet with students outside of class and sometimes on site to address key concerns arising from their field work. In the case of Children's Lives, a first year seminar, I give students the option to work with four long term community partners of mine- The Oneonta Teen Center, Violence Intervention Program and Safe House (VIP), Head Start, and community anti-hunger organizations. Students can choose from among these arenas. In class and through papers and oral presentations, we link the students'

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community experiences to the class readings, movies, speakers as well as Sociology methods and theory and explicitly to a human rights framework by using the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I utilize this model of accompanying students through the alignment process and potentially to activist work of their own in most of my courses.

Children's Lives

Based on insights from my NOW organizing, I began work in 1990 with the Migrant Tutorial Program. My focus was on women, children, and rural poverty. This fieldwork led me to re-conceptualize my First Year Seminar as a course entitled, Children's Lives. The course's substantive areas became the impact of war on children, the structural violence of economic inequality, and the impact of local, national, and global racism on children. Through class papers and discussion, students explicitly link their field work to children's rights as outlined in the UN Convention. My work with the Migrant Tutorial Program led to later work with a teen pregnancy prevention program and, subsequently, to the development of a youth advocacy non-profit, OCAY-Oneonta Community Alliance for Youth.

Oneonta Community Alliance for Youth (OCAY) & Teens and Families

After working with the Migrant Tutorial Program, I was inspired to work with youth to confront the intersection of class and gender inequality in our rural community. This commitment resulted in six years of applied research and activist work on a teen pregnancy prevention program, Project REACH, developed by Planned Parenthood. My experience with that project in an adjacent county pushed me to construct teen programs in our town as well.

In 1996, I worked with local parents and teens to create an organization I coined OCAY- a youth advocacy group- and in 2006, established the Oneonta Teen Center and OCAY as a 501C3 non-profit corporation. I linked this line of community organizing to a new course entitled Teens and Families and engaged students in grassroots youth mobilization and project development. The course allowed me to train students to work with youth in the community and to create applied research projects which informed the development of the

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Oneonta Teen Center programming. Over the years, I have had students work with area youth treatment programs as well as the Oneonta Teen Center and VIP. This course explores race, class, gender, and youth rights and engages students as mentors and allies in their community sites.

Human Rights, Economic Justice, and Transnational Solidarity

I developed another model of accompaniment through development of year-round, ongoing programming related to my youth organizing work in Oneonta and my work with Mayan women in a weaving cooperative in Chiapas, Mexico. In these cases, developing activities in relation to the Oneonta Teen Center which I founded, allows students to participate in year round events dedicated to the funding and operation of the center. Events include music shows, holiday events, fundraising rock music concerts, leadership council meetings. I participate in these events as well and discuss with students in all sorts of settings and venues.

In 1996, I initiated an international phase of my work and linked activism and CBSL to Women and Social Change, Children's Lives, and an off campus course in Chiapas, Mexico entitled, Weaving Solidarity- Fair Trade, Human Rights and Social Justice. My work with the Mayan women's weaving cooperative, Jolom Mayaetik, began in 1998. This phase of development, accompaniment and a 'solidarity model,' involves national and international alliance building and networking, economic solidarity, popular education, and research (O'Donnell 2010).

For the course, I refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Zapatista Law for Women as well as proceedings from the Beijing Indigenous Women's Conference and speeches by the leaders of Jolom Mayaetik to build the class's human rights framework. When the class is in Chiapas, our CBSL work is dictated by the time and capacity of our NGO and the Mayan women's weaving cooperative partners. If there are projects to be undertaken, we do them. The bulk of the time, students are meeting community activists involved in social justice organizing.

Although the solidarity does not stop when back in the states, it has been more difficult to engage students in ongoing CBSL-related work once we return. I have developed a seminar, Weaving

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Transnational Solidarity, to engage students in the everyday business work - sales, inventory, accounting - that is part of the economic solidarity relationship. By far, this has been the most challenging CBSL task to date. Nevertheless, several students have committed to the long haul of such relationships, most have chosen to work on more short term projects like Fair Trade textile sales, our Anti-Sweatshop fashion show, and Salsa & Solidarity - events that I have developed to foreground the economic justice work and to do popular education.

For the Chiapas work, I have created activities related to fair trade. Activities have often centered on fair trade textile, chocolate, and coffee sales. Students and I have also done movies, speakers, forums, community events. A recent outcome of this stemmed from students in my Food and Social Justice course deciding to pursue making the college a Fair Trade campus—a certification process that is comprehensive and affects policies relating to food, clothing, sports equipment, and education.

Reflections on Collaborative Projects and Social Justice

I conceptualize student CBSL as more than participant observation. As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, the emphasis is on creating community partnerships for social justice and CBSL functions as the opportunity for students to align with community and social movement activists. Linking community challenges and educational mission allows us to create relationships based on mutual respect, to challenge the race, class, gender, privilege matrix which feeds town-gown conflicts, stereotypes, and insularity, and to use our collective wisdom to tackle the key issues of our time. Student researchers have commented on a growing sense of community, recognition of community needs, increased sense of efficacy, and recognition of town-gown relationships and the politics of power. This is the work of Public Sociology informed by a social justice-centered form of engagement (Ward and Moore 2010).

In the case of CBSL work with OCAY, community-based service learning, research, and activism were central in moving the youth rights agenda. A local skate park, music performance space, Teen Center, and after school program-'construction sites'- have emerged from that organizing as well as research in the public interest

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and teaching and learning experiences linked to organizational needs and student interests and skills.

While the Oneonta Teen Center was developed to meet teen's desire for a social, live music space, families' interest in a safe, supervised, and creative place for teens, and the local government's concern for youth, the community-based work which evolved in conjunction with my community organizing was also designed to increase the participation of college students as allies, mentors, and researchers working together with the teens on youth initiatives thereby developing the leadership of community members, local teens, and college members in the process. Placing this organizing within the context of best practices for democratic and authentic partnerships is critical for future work and raises questions regarding the extent to which partnering institutions share visions, support systems, and values.

Since 1986, I have had the ability to work with the community to address emergent concerns and develop multiple forms of engagement as an individual faculty and community member but not within the context of an institutional partners program. Historically, outside of programs which require certification, faculty members develop, oversee, and maintain community relationships without having institutional infrastructure, transportation, or staff assistance. Not having an institutional community partners program has made maintaining communication and continuity a challenge. It has also been difficult not to address community issues at an institutional level as I cannot speak for the entire organization. These inadequacies have pushed me to form alliances and work in coalitions and to develop independent community organizations when necessary to accomplish community goals.

In order to insure that community organizations had the volunteer resources and projects they could use, I have worked with the same community partners for decades and have developed courses within my discipline to provide student volunteers and other resources across time. In the case of our local youth organizing movement, I spearheaded work with others to create OCAY, a non-profit organization with a board of directors, a paid manager, and a Youth Leadership Council, and personally co-partnered with OCAY via Sociology courses, internships, and research. In 2011, for the first time

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at Hartwick, a new campus center for engagement provides the college with the opportunity to institutionalize a formal partners program informed by civic engagement principles.

While Hartwick has a fifty year history of international programs, its primary manifestation has been short term immersion classes. Long term partnerships are largely faculty prerogatives - individually cultivated, organized, supported, and sustained. Whether these faculty -driven programs will be sustained by the college after faculty -initiator retirements is questionable. Because of this structural reality, reaching the goals of social justice and economic solidarity with Jolom Mayaetik remains mostly outside of my academic context where it has already largely existed. If academic institutions cannot meet the solidarity challenge, activists must align themselves with existing non-profits and networks or establish separate non- profits and foundations.

Global Partner Realities

During a Chiapas course delegation in 2009, the women of the weaving cooperative reiterated their need for new markets and thanked me for the work I had done. They also shared with us their continuing struggles around hunger, money, and outmigration of men for jobs in the US. Since I began this work in 1998, these issues have continued unabated along with continued low intensity warfare, crushing economic conditions, weakened peso, and increasing staple food costs. Income from women's weavings has become a significant and increasing part of family income and is keeping families with food and basic necessities.

After our 2007 *encuentro* in Chiapas revealed our solidarity network's many weaknesses, I asked US solidarity people about forming a US based non- profit. I created modest internet presence. Not hearing from many in the network, I queried the group again and received mixed responses to organizational development via chapters.

In 2008, I proposed that Hartwick host a Weaving Solidarity Network linked to the Hartwick Center for Interdependence. I thought that this institutional site had the potential to extend the economic solidarity work beyond me and the members of occasional off-campus classes and invite participation from staff, faculty, students, and local Oneonta community members. I did not receive

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any reply to my proposal. In 2009, after several years of negotiations, I confirmed with Jolom that creating an independent US solidarity organization would be acceptable.

In 2009, I once again brought the campus proposal forward and received a negative response in 2010. While establishing a Weaving Solidarity Network at my institution proved impossible, a new Center for Professional, Service and Global Engagement was created. In light of these developments, I made the decision to go much more public and more formal on the visibility front in order to introduce the US public to the Jolom story in the context of human rights in order to increase sales, volunteers, medical and educational resources, and donors. On the economic front, greater visibility helps to market textiles and develop grants for the network's health and education work and clinic practice. Launching a US foundation or aligning with an existing non-profit organization with parallel interests is the next necessary step in the solidarity process (see Tarrow 2005 on upward scale-shift).

At the institutional level, genuine civic engagement requires that the college build infrastructure to support endeavors which must move beyond the course or professor. Academic institutions can incorporate domestic and international solidarity dimensions within their Centers for Civic Engagement or International Studies. If motivated by social justice, such a commitment would foreground grassroots concerns and long term commitments to community-based collaborations on key structural concerns; courses and research would link to those community-determined, structural foci.

In conclusion, there are important lessons to be learned at every level by undertaking transnational and local civic engagement and solidarity-lessons that include disciplinary specifics, but which extend far beyond to life, social justice, and the practice of democracy. For me, participatory democracy has meant empowering people and linking campus and community via organizing, programs, curriculum, and local, national, and global projects. We are using our experiences, cross-cultural knowledge, and scholarly frameworks and research to inform our work and analysis and to critically reflect on that same work in the hope of forging community and social justice.

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Katherine O'Donnell, Ph.D. Indiana University, is a Professor of Sociology at Hartwick College. As an activist scholar and community organizer, she has worked for 30 years in human rights campaigns for youth, women's, indigenous, and labor rights and economic justice. In 1996, after six years of community-based research with Project REACH, a Planned Parenthood teen pregnancy prevention and youth empowerment program, she co-founded OCAY-Oneonta Community Alliance for Youth—a non-profit, youth advocacy 501C3 organization which spearheaded the creation of the Oneonta Skatepark and the Oneonta Teen Center. She is currently president of OCAY. Since 1998, she has worked in economic solidarity with Jolom Mayaetik, a Mayan women's weaving cooperative in Chiapas, Mexico, and markets their hand-woven textiles through Fair Trade tours, academic conferences, and other major commercial venues across the US. The solidarity relationship also includes educational delegations and work with a Mayan nuns' clinic specializing in midwifery. At Hartwick, she established the Women's Center, the Teaching Learning Community (TLC), and co-founded the Women's Studies Program and Delaware-Otsego Counties NOW. She has been a key proponent of civic engagement at Hartwick College and utilizes CBSL in her First Year Seminar - Children's Lives as well as in Qualitative Methods, Teens & Families, Food & Social Justice, and Women and Social Change courses. She was awarded the national NERCHE Lynton Award for Faculty Professional Service and Academic Outreach in 2006. Her book, *Weaving Transnational Solidarity- from the Catskills to Chiapas and Beyond*, was published by Brill Press, The Netherlands, in 2010.

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