

Verdad

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What It Is That I Do?

I was at a party recently and met an economist from Marine Sciences. As often happens when academics meet, he asked me what area I worked in. By this he meant what theoretical background did I have, what topics did I research, what grants and projects did I have, and how much did I contribute to the literature. I used to dread that question because I didn't always have a good answer.

I was trained as a Rural Sociologist with areas of emphasis in community development, rurality, research methodology, and demography. I was really trained as a researcher, but theory and scholarship (I mean the intense reading in your field) were never my strengths. Research methods and statistics were my strengths within my discipline, and at heart I believed in community development as a good thing for the future of communities. When I applied for my first jobs in 1984, I looked for research positions, but the best and only position for me was in Extension as being an applied sociologist.

I wasn't sure this was my future, but the position was a good one and I got the job. For the first few years I struggled with this position - wondering if research was a better use of my time. I took the Extension work seriously and I found I liked it, and was good at it. It turns out the position fit me very well, but I had to work to be a good applied sociologist. The position fit me very well in that it was very consistent with my interest in community development, and instead of talking about it, I was actually doing it. But always at conferences and meetings, and even within my department, I realized that Extension work was viewed as something less important than research. My saving grace was always that I was strong in statistics - the researchers often knew I had better data skills than they had. The early years were a struggle, but I resolved in my own mind and I was content with the answer I chose.

As I became a better applied sociologist, I realized that I loved working with groups to help them do projects in their community. I started to realize that often they wanted help with a needs assessment project - a survey, a focus group, developing a strategic plan, or a visioning project. That is why they turned to an "expert." But in reality, they also needed a way to come together to work for a common goal in their community. I started to find ways to do surveys for a community that involved local leaders in the design, data collection (as interviewers) and at times the analysis (as reactors and planners). I found I was good at this, although there was a steep learning curve and some tricky moments to pull it off. I rejected the notion of the expert coming in to tell them the answer of what to do. My slogan was, "It is not something I will do to you, or for you, but *with* you."

So, I became a facilitator, a conflict resolutionist, a collaborator, and a needs assessment guy, all wrapped up into one. I learned that my skills in surveys and research methods were the ones that led groups to come to me at first, but it was my

skills at facilitation and collaboration that made the project work. I used this approach for such things as high school students and a telephone survey, a chamber of commerce group and strategic planning, an economic development group and visioning for the future, and an industry group and the conflict within their industry.

This is what lead me into Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E). A community wanted help in relating to their existing businesses. I was familiar with the program which began with a survey of existing businesses, but it also sought to involve local leaders in the process. It fit well with my developing strategy of involving people in local needs assessment projects. The first project went very well and it kept going from there. My interest was really community development - getting people involved in decisions for the future of their community. It fit very well with smaller communities where there were still opportunities for a larger group of local leaders to shape the future of their community - not just a few paid experts. Instead of having 3 or 4 people makes decisions about existing business programs, I could get 50 to 70 involved in a local BR&E program. I really enjoyed working on these types of programs.

Now, back to my answer of what it is I do. As I developed these ideas I needed a way to express it. I was never really good at journal articles - I didn't have the patience to do all the reading and literature review necessary for journal articles. I should be better with this, but my heart isn't in it. But when I think about what it is I do, my slogan is, ***"I help make things happen."*** I listen, I relate, I put away my ego, and I focus on what they need and I help make it happen. I feel really good about that - that it is a worthy pursuit. I don't worry about how famous I am in academia. I'm looking to feel good about what it is that I contribute to the world around me.

I believe it is these same things that made people want me to be the chair. I don't think of the position as being about what I want. I see it as service to te department first, the college second, and the university third. I try to focus on moving my group forward - faculty, professionals, staff, and students. In these attempts there are always some who don't want to move forward, but most do. I'm not so good at forcing people to do things that don't want to do, but I am good at helping those that do want to grow to find a way forward. Dr. Rejto would be one of my success stories.

The gentleman at the party didn't want to hear that I help make things happen, so I gave him a more traditional academic answer in community economic development and needs assessment. But what I really do is help make things happen, and I am finally content and feel good about what I do. I don't need to be famous in the academic world on the national scene. I do want to contribute and make a difference in whatever project or committee I serve on, or whatever position I am in. I want to do good work. That is what motivates me. That is what makes me happy.