The Impact of a Service-Learning Project on Student Awareness of Homelessness, Civic Attitudes, and Stereotypes Toward the Homeless

Kim Buch and Susan Harden

Abstract

In 2008, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) joined in a community initiative with the Urban Ministry Center to provide shelter to the homeless during the winter months. A student organization was formed to sustain university support. The author created a service-learning project as part of a Citizenship and Service Practicum course. Three semesters of end-of-course student evaluations indicate that the service-learning experience had an impact on the students in three ways. It raised awareness of homelessness; helped dispel negative stereotypes and foster more positive attitudes; and promoted positive civic attitudes and desire to "make a difference."

Introduction

*I*n the decade following the Kellogg Commission Report, The Engaged Institution *(1999)*, higher education has embraced an "engaged scholarship" model as a vehicle for achieving its tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. This model brings the intellectual, scientific, and human resources of the university into the community to address significant social and economic problems *(Boyer, 1991; Davidson, Petersen, Hankins, & Winslow, 2010)*. This model has many societal benefits, as university-community partnerships address diverse challenges ranging from HIV/AIDS *(Finkelstein, 2002)* to sustainable agriculture *(Packer, 2009)* to poverty and homelessness *(Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005)*.

One form of engaged scholarship may be found in the teaching strategy of service-learning. Students who participate in service-learning opportunities derive educational benefits from an engaged scholarship model, including personal, interpersonal, skill, and career development as well as academic learning *(Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001)*. Service-learning can also reduce student stereotypes, facilitate cultural and racial understanding, and build a sense of social responsibility that may foster future community service *(Eyler et al., 2001)*. In short, an engaged scholarship higher

education approach offers both immediate and long-term positive educational and societal outcomes.

This article describes the application of an engaged scholarship model in a service-learning course at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, which is located in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the southeastern United States.

The State of North Carolina and the City of Charlotte

North Carolina. As indicated in the 2010 census, the southern region of the United States is experiencing massive population growth. The southern states account for slightly more than half of all population growth since the 2000 census. Almost 1.5 million people have migrated to North Carolina since 2000, yielding an 18.5% increase in population. Because of its mild but diverse climate, economic opportunity, and lower cost of living, North Carolina is one of a handful of southern states receiving national attention. Its rising political influence is reflected in the Democratic National Committee's selection of Charlotte, North Carolina, as the site for the 2012 Democratic convention.

Charlotte, North Carolina. With exploding population growth for the past two decades, Charlotte has undergone dramatic demographic and economic change, including significant immigration from abroad and in-migration within the United States. Charlotte's metro population is now 13% foreign born, with a significant majority born in Mexico *(American Community Survey, 2006)*. Charlotte is considered a Hispanic hypergrowth area and serves as a major immigrant gateway city *(Smith & Furuseth, 2004)*. If the rapid trend toward multicultural diversity and away from traditional Southern biracial demographics continues, Charlotte will be a majority non-White community by 2015, a balance presaged by the current majority-poor public school population. However, Charlotte ranks as the sixth-wealthiest large city in the United States. It is the second-largest financial center and is headquarters to the largest bank in the United States.

With growth and demographic change, the gaps in education and economic opportunity have widened. The impact of these disparities became glaringly evident in 2001, when Robert Putnam conducted a Social Capital Survey in Charlotte and 39 other cities. Charlotte, which had previously labeled itself a "New South" city, ranked 39th out of 40 cities on measures of interracial trust. This result signaled to the community the presence of tensions and

problems that threatened to further divide an increasingly diverse community of residents.

Higher Education in North Carolina

UNC Charlotte is one of 17 campuses in the North Carolina University system, a system which has a demonstrated commitment to engaged scholarship.

The University of North Carolina System of Higher Education. The multicampus state system includes all public educational institutions that grant baccalaureate degrees. The UNC Board of Governors is the policy-making body legally charged with "the general determination, control, supervision, management, and governance of all affairs of the constituent institutions" *(http://www.northcarolina.edu/bog/index.htm)*. The UNC system administrators have encouraged the system's campuses to deepen community engagement. A 2007 study commissioned by the Board of Governors, *UNC Tomorrow*, made significant community engagement recommendations for member campuses. The purpose of the study, led by the UNC Board of Governors Chairman Jim Phillips, UNC System President Erskine Bowles, and 28 community leaders from industry, education, government, and nonprofit sectors, was learning "what the people of North Carolina need from their University and making relevant recommendations to the UNC Board of Governors" *(UNC Tomorrow Commission, 2007)*. The study, which actively sought input from the community, included visits to all 17 UNC campuses, community and faculty forums, a public online survey, and a blog. At public forums, community members were encouraged to look forward 20 years and respond to the following questions:

1. What are the most important challenges facing your community, and how can public universities help?

2. What programs and services should the university offer?

3. What knowledge and skills do students need?

4. How can the UNC system help improve economic opportunities in your area?

The final report included the following recommendations for outreach and engagement (emphasis added):

1. UNC should become more *directly* engaged with and connected to the people of North Carolina, its regions, and our state as a whole.

2. UNC should *apply, translate, and communicate* research and scholarship to broader audiences.

3. UNC should develop a *strategic plan for scholarly public service* on each campus that is detailed and specific in definition and scope.

4. UNC should *create a mechanism* for applying research and scholarship to addressing significant regional and statewide issues.

5. UNC should *communicate* its resources and expertise to wider audiences.

Recommendation 4.4.1, "UNC should increase its capacity and commitment to respond to and lead economic transformation and community development" *(UNC Tomorrow Commission, 2007)*, would become particularly relevant to the authors as they worked with the Niner Neighbors student organization—the topic of this article.

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) was founded in 1946 and joined the University of North Carolina system in 1965 as a teaching-focused campus. As a member of the UNC university system, UNC Charlotte is North Carolina's urban, research intensive university. The core mission of the university is to leverage its location in the state's largest city to offer internationally competitive programs of research and creative activity, exemplary undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, and a focused set of community engagement initiatives. Over the years, the convergence of local, statewide, and national forces has propelled UNC Charlotte to commit to a higher level of community engagement.

Toward this end, the university joined the North Carolina Campus Compact, a national higher education association dedicated solely to campus-based civic engagement. Campus Compact promotes public and community service that develops students' citizenship skills, helps campuses forge effective community partnerships, and provides resources and training for faculty members seeking to integrate civic and community-based learning into the curriculum. Next, the university added a number of university positions dedicated to supporting engagement, changed its mission statement to include a statement on the importance of community engagement, and increased the focus of engagement within the curriculum.

Subsequently, UNC Charlotte was one of the founding community partners in a citywide collaboration called Crossroads Charlotte, intended to build social capital and increase interracial trust. By 2008, the university's focus on expanding community engagement had intensified so much that the campus applied for and received designation as a Carnegie Community Engaged Campus by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching *("University Earns," 2009)*. Today, communities in Charlotte look to the university as a partner for solving urban challenges caused by rapid growth, increasing diversity, and economic disparity.

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the Urban Ministry Center Partner to Address Homelessness in Charlotte: A Community Problem and a Shared Solution

More than 5,000 people in the Charlotte region are homeless. Nearly half are families; more than a third are children. Since 1996, the Urban Ministry Center (www.urbanministrycenter.org), a nonprofit interfaith facility in center-city Charlotte, has leveraged community volunteers and resources to provide temporary shelter for these individuals through a program called Room in the Inn. Each Room in the Inn site offers a warm, safe place to sleep, serves three meals (dinner, breakfast, and a bag lunch), and the following morning returns those helped to uptown Charlotte. The simple goal is to keep homeless people from freezing on cold winter nights. A greater goal is to provide a more personal relationship to homeless people, at least for a night, and a deeper understanding of the depth and complexity of the issue of homelessness for volunteers. In 2009–2010, Room in the Inn provided a total of 17,465 overnight accommodations to 1,437 different people, who are referred to as "neighbors."

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Each winter night (December through March), neighbors queue up at the back door of the Urban Ministry Center around 4:00 p.m. for a carefully formatted intake and registration process. Each person is breathalysed, and must show state-issued identification or receive a waiver from center staff. Each person is entered

into a database to help determine who is using the program and how often. An off-duty police officer is on site at all times.

On any given night, between 10 and 15 host sites pick up between six and 14 neighbors and take them to the host facility for a hot meal and an evening of fellowship and conversation. At many sites, neighbors have access to telephones, showers, and laundry facilities. The host group recruits volunteers who spend the night with their homeless neighbors, and in the morning serve breakfast and then drive the neighbors back to uptown Charlotte. In the 2009–2010 season, an estimated 10,000 Room in the Inn volunteers throughout the community helped in some way: registering neighbors, driving, making dinner, serving dinner, chaperoning overnight, making sandwiches for lunch, or simply sharing a meal and conversation.

In 2008, UNC Charlotte became a Room in the Inn partner and began hosting neighbors at nearby off-campus sites. That first winter, student participants were drawn from learning communities and service-learning classes whose faculty members also participated and awarded course credit for their students' participation. Additional students were attracted by the University Volunteer Services Office, which promoted the program and spread awareness. The UNC Charlotte Staff Organization also supported the program by providing volunteers and food for the neighbors' meals. That first year (2008), an estimated 75 students, faculty and staff members hosted 45 neighbors overnight, served 135 meals, and raised money and donations for all operating costs.

In 2009, Crossroads Charlotte became involved in the program, providing leadership, resources, and volunteer and site coordination. Student volunteers took the initiative to form a new, fully chartered student organization called Niner Neighbors, to institutionalize the program at UNC Charlotte, and obtain university funding support. The university's nickname is the Forty-niners, and the students chose the name Niner Neighbors to signify their commitment to serving their homeless neighbors. Like all chartered student organizations, Niner Neighbors has a slate of officers and faculty advisors (the coauthors of this article). However, Niner Neighbors differs from other student organizations because of its academic linkages with the university's service-learning courses. Students who enroll in one of the linked service-learning courses receive their experiential learning credit through their volunteer work with Niner Neighbors.

Since 2009, student leadership has helped grow the program. Additional site partners were secured, which allowed more neighbors to be served by even more student, faculty, and staff volunteers. In 2010, the program expanded again as campus Greek organizations became involved in hosting neighbors and in food drives to sustain the program. In its 3 years of operation, an estimated 400 campus volunteers have supported Niner Neighbors. Only a subset of these volunteers also enroll concurrently in a linked service-learning course, as described in the method section below.

Program Goals: Increasing Awareness, Changing Stereotypes, Promoting Civic Attitudes

Although the primary purpose of Niner Neighbors is to provide a warm place to sleep for homeless neighbors in the community, the goals also focus on students who participate in the program. These include (1) raising awareness about homelessness; (2) changing stereotypes and attitudes toward homeless individuals; and (3) promoting positive civic attitudes. These goals are congruent with the goals of UNC Charlotte's partner, Urban Ministries Center, which has a community education outreach program designed to raise awareness of, and to change attitudes toward, the homeless.

Raising Awareness About Homelessness

Increasing awareness of issues of social justice and societal inequities is one goal of the service-learning movement in higher education *(Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2009)*. It is hoped that service-learning activities will make students more aware of social problems through their direct contact with real people experiencing real problems *(Monard-Weissman, 2003)*. It has been argued that encountering structural inequities is a prerequisite for developing social awareness, just as encountering culturally different others is a prerequisite for developing cultural awareness *(Proctor et al., 2010)*. One study found that participation in an engaged

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scholarship project at Michigan State University raised student awareness of the problem of juvenile delinquency *(Davidson et al., 2010)*. Another study found that a service-learning experience at a homeless shelter raised awareness of the seriousness of homelessness *(Hocking & Lawrence, 2000)*.

Similarly, Niner Neighbors seeks to raise student awareness of homelessness as a pressing community problem. Students who participate in Niner Neighbors experience firsthand both the proximity and the magnitude of the homelessness problem, and are expected to have increased awareness as a result.

Changing Stereotypes and Attitudes Toward Homeless Individuals

A second goal of Niner Neighbors is to challenge student stereotypes and attitudes about homelessness. Changing negative stereotypes and attitudes about diverse, disenfranchised, or marginalized groups is another common goal of service-learning and engaged scholarship projects *(Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004)*. Several studies have shown changes in stereotypes or attitudes of college students toward different groups, including the elderly *(Layfield, 2004; Shue, McNeley, & Arnold, 2005)*, people with HIV/AIDS *(Jones & Abes, 2003)*, and the poor *(Proctor et al., 2010)*. The homeless are a marginalized group that stimulates a range of negative stereotypes. Hocking and Lawrence *(2000)* describe the stereotypical homeless person as "male, lazy, morally bankrupt, and potentially dangerous" *(p. 92)*. Other stereotypes mark the homeless as unmotivated and work-averse; uneducated and lacking in marketable skills and talents; likely to abuse alcohol or drugs; or mentally ill *(Hughes et al., 2009; Knecht & Martinez, 2009)*. In short, people are less likely to attribute positive personality traits to the homeless than to people in general *(Leibowitz & Krueger, 2005)*.

Because such stereotypes and attitudes have many implications for individuals and society, they are natural targets of change efforts by service-learning and engaged scholarship programs. Hocking and Lawrence *(2000)* measured changes in attitudes toward the homeless among college students following a service-learning experience. Using the contact hypothesis from social psychology *(Allport, 1954)*, they expected that a 15-hour service experience at a local homeless shelter would have a positive effect on student attitudes toward the homeless. Results were supportive. Participants rated the homeless as more socially attractive and less blameworthy than did nonparticipant students *(Hocking & Lawrence, 2000)*.

Because Niner Neighbors also places students in sustained contact with the homeless, it is hoped that their participation will result in improved attitudes, and in stereotype reduction.

Promoting Positive Civic Attitudes

A third goal of Niner Neighbors is to promote positive civic attitudes and student desire to "make a difference." This, too, is a common goal of service-learning and engaged scholarship projects. Eyler et al. *(2001)* reviewed more than 40 studies reporting positive effects of service-learning on student sense of social responsibility, citizenship skills, or commitment to service. More recently, Buch *(2008)* found that students who participated in service projects as part of a discipline-centered learning community had significantly higher scores on the Civic Action Scale *(Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002)* than a comparison group of students not in the learning community. Using the same scale, another study reported positive changes in civic action scores among students participating in a semester-long service-learning project *(Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002)*. Hocking and Lawrence *(2000)* used an engaged scholarship project in which students volunteered in a homeless shelter to compare behavioral commitment toward the homeless in participating students with that of a control group of students not participating. Results showed differences in the two groups on five behavioral commitment items: serving as a sponsor for a homeless person, allowing a homeless person to move in temporarily, spending a night as a volunteer at a homeless shelter, persuading others to get involved in helping the homeless, and voting for a candidate making homelessness a high priority *(Hocking & Lawrence, 2000)*. Like the Hocking and Lawrence project, Niner Neighbors seeks to change student civic attitudes and commitment to making a difference through real-world engagement with the real-world problems of poverty and homelessness.

Assessment Method

Study participants included 114 students who participated in Niner Neighbors as part of their service-learning requirements for an elective course called Citizenship and Service Practicum, which was taught by the first author of this article in 2008, 2009, and 2010. The 114 students represent a subset of all students participating in Niner Neighbors (approximately 400) during these years. About 75% of students in the course were psychology majors; the rest of

the students were majoring in another social science or in business. About 70% of the students were female.

The Citizenship and Service Practicum is a service-learning course for which students receive "SL" designation on their transcripts. All such designated courses at UNC Charlotte combine an experiential service component with related classroom learning experiences. For this course, the related classroom learning experiences include readings on poverty and homelessness and discussions and reflective writings that relate the course content to the Niner Neighbors experience. The course also includes a final in which students share their experiences with each other via a multimedia presentation that showcases what they have learned about poverty and homelessness through readings and direct experiences with homeless neighbors.

Data Collection

Data were collected from all students enrolled in the Citizenship and Service course each of three years as part of an end-of-semester assessment. Because there was no preassessment, the design was a retrospective case study, which according to Yin *(1994),* is suitable for exploring student changes from immersion in a "real-life setting" to the contemporary social phenomena of homelessness. A retrospective case study attempts to measure preintervention attitudes by asking participants to reflect back on the experience and how it might have influenced their perceptions or attitudes. A retrospective survey can yield quantitative data, but unlike a pre-post design, it yields only one data point and so does not allow for statistical comparisons *(Yin, 1994).* As described below, the study utilized multimethod data sources—some qualitative, some quantitative, some retrospective—to explore the three goals of Niner Neighbors.

The end-of-semester assessment was designed to measure student awareness of attitudes and stereotypes toward the homeless, as well as civic attitudes. The assessment included a combination of quantitative, qualitative, and retrospective items. To measure the change in student awareness of the problem of homelessness, 4 retrospective items were used, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale. Students responded to the following statements about volunteering for Niner Neighbors:

- raised my awareness about homelessness;

- increased my desire to help the homeless;

- increased my compassion and concern for the home-less; and

- made me feel that "I can make a difference."

To measure the goal of changing student stereotypes and attitudes toward homeless individuals, the assessment contained open-ended retrospective questions that asked students to "describe your perceptions of homeless people before Niner Neighbors" and "describe your perceptions of homeless people after Niner Neighbors." A final qualitative item asked students to "comment on your Niner Neighbor experience and how it made you feel."

To measure the goal of promoting positive civic attitudes, the assessment incorporated the Civic Attitudes Scale, a scale developed by Mabry *(1998)* consisting of five Likert items, each rated on a 5-point scale.

To prepare for a presentation at the 2010 National Outreach Scholarship Conference, students in the 2010 Citizenship and Service Practicum course conducted interviews with Niner Neighbors participants. This resulted in a DVD that was shown at the conference, and which is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1eP05khqzM.

Findings from the End-of-Course Assessment

The end-of-course responses were combined for the three iterations of the course. Responses to the retrospective items about the Niner Neighbors organization supported the first two goals of Niner Neighbors—to raise awareness of and change attitudes and stereotypes about homelessness. As shown in Table 1, mean scores indicated that students felt that Niner Neighbors raised their awareness of the problem of homelessness and increased their desire to do something about it.

Table 1. Means Showing Student Perceptions of Niner Neighbors

Item	Mean
Volunteering for Niner Neighbors	
• raised my awareness about the homeless.	5.85
• increased my desire to help the homeless.	5.60
• increased my compassion and concern for the homeless.	5.71
• made me feel that "I can make a difference."	5.10

N = 114. The 4 items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale where 6 = Strongly Agree.

Student responses to the open-ended retrospective items were content analyzed to identify themes related to the goals of changing stereotypes and attitudes toward the homeless. This analysis confirmed the presence of common stereotypes toward the homeless prior to student involvement in Niner Neighbors. In general, student stereotypes mirrored those reported in the literature—that homeless individuals tend to be unmotivated and work-averse, abuse alcohol or drugs, or be mentally ill. Selected quotes from student responses that are representative of these themes appear in column 2 of Figure 1. The analysis also revealed that Niner Neighbors challenged these stereotypes and contributed to the development of new, more positive attitudes toward the homeless, as revealed in quotes from the same students in column 3 of Figure 1.

Question on End-of-Course Evaluation	"Describe your perceptions of homeless people *before* Niner Neighbors."	"Describe your perceptions of homeless people *after* Niner Neighbors."
Student 1	"Before this project, I thought they were bums and they needed to get a job."	"They are trying to get on their feet and they just need some help."
Student 2	"I thought they were homeless because of their poor choices; I really didn't think of them as my equals."	"I see that they are people just like me and I can learn a lot from them."
Student 3	"I thought they were lazy and some wanted hand-outs. They were dirty and not like 'us.' Now I'm sorry for feeling this way."	"Just like us. Very educated people and were once successful. Not everyone brought this on themselves."
Student 3	"That they put themselves there, drug users, pan-handlers."	Good people, sometimes out of their control; Humans just like me."
Student 4	"I thought that they were lazy and that they were typically drug/alcohol addicts. I hate to admit it but I actually feared being near them."	"I've learned that homelessness can happen to anyone and that they are no different than the rest of us. They just need love and compassion."

Note: Responses are representative of themes derived from 114 respondents.

Figure 1: Student Responses Showing Changing Attitudes Toward the Homeless

Content analysis of the survey item "Comment on your Niner Neighbor experience and how it made you feel" revealed several additional themes: It was hard work but worth it; it helped respondents be prepared for future jobs in the helping professions; it helped them appreciate their own lives and opportunities; it helped them feel good to help others; it was empowering to see that they could make a difference; surprise at how much they enjoyed it and how much they learned from it; regret, even outrage, that so many people face homelessness. Similar themes emerged from the interviews featured in the DVD presented at the National Outreach Scholarship Conference *(Buch et al., 2010)*.

Findings from the five Civic Attitudes Scale items are displayed in Table 2. More than three-fourths of respondents agreed on the statements that "Adults should give some time for the good of their community or country"; that "People, regardless of whether they've been successful or not, ought to help others"; and that "It is important to help others even if you don't get paid for it." More than two-thirds of respondents agreed that "Individuals have a responsibility to help solve our social problems" and that "I feel that I can make a difference in the world."

Table 2. Student Responses to Civic Attitudes Scale (Mabry, 1998)

Civic Attitude Item	Percent Agreed
Adults should give some time for the good of their community or country.	80.4%
People, regardless of whether they've been successful or not, ought to help others.	82.6%
Individuals have a responsibility to help solve our social problems.	63.1%
I feel that I can make a difference in the world.	67.4%
It is important to help others even if you don't get paid	84.8%

N = 114. The 5 items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale where 5 = Strongly Agree.

Discussion

The findings from the end-of-semester assessments of three iterations of the Citizenship and Service Practicum course in which students participate in the Niner Neighbors organization support the viability of Niner Neighbors as a community engagement project. The end-of-course evaluations indicated that Niner Neighbors raised awareness of homelessness by providing participants firsthand experience with the proximity and the magnitude of the homelessness problem. The analysis of the students'

open-ended responses suggests that they felt more knowledgeable about their homeless neighbors and more prepared for future careers as helping professionals.

> *"The analysis of the students' open-ended responses suggests that they felt more knowledgeable about their homeless neighbors and more prepared for future careers as helping professionals."*

The evaluations confirmed the existence of negative stereotypes and attitudes toward the homeless among college students, but also suggested that participation in Niner Neighbors helped dispel negative stereotypes and foster more positive attitudes. Specifically, the students' responses suggested that through interpersonal interactions, students began to see the homeless as individuals with whom they had a lot in common. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that contact with homeless individuals can change stereotypes and attitudes toward the homeless among undergraduate students *(Hocking & Lawrence, 2000)*, medical residents *(Buchanan, Rohr, Kehoe, Glick, & Jain, 2004)*, and adult volunteers *(Knecht & Martinez, 2009)*.

Finally, the findings showed that through real-world engagement with the real-world problem of homelessness, Niner Neighbors promoted positive civic attitudes and student desire to "make a difference." The student responses revealed positive civic attitudes (belief that we all share a civic responsibility to contribute to the greater good) as well as a personal desire to contribute. Not only did the students grow in their sense of civic and personal responsibility, but they found enjoyment and satisfaction in their contributions. These results are consistent with previous research findings that service-learning can increase plans for future civic action *(Buch, 2008; Moely, McFarland, et al., 2002)* and, more specifically, intentions to help the homeless in the future *(Hocking & Lawrence, 2000)*.

Conclusion

This article described an engaged scholarship project that links a campus volunteer organization with designated service-learning courses that are part of the university's curriculum. The project has been successful in attracting more than 400 campus volunteers

that have provided temporary housing for more than 100 homeless neighbors. In the future, the authors plan to sustain the project through continuation of the Niner Neighbors student organization and to grow the project through the creation of more linkages with existing service-learning courses. The authors also plan to expand project assessment beyond the end-of-course assessment reported here. They are developing an online pre-post survey—similar to the one used in this study—for administration to all future Niner Neighbors participants. The goal is to demonstrate the efficacy of an engaged scholarship project for promoting more positive attitudes toward the homeless that, in turn, promote increased community engagement and volunteerism.

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About the Authors

Kim Buch is an associate professor of psychology and coordinator of the Psychology Learning Community at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research focuses on the implementation and evaluation of organizational development and institutional change programs. She earned her bachelor's degree from Western Kentucky University and her master's degree and Ph.D. from Iowa State University.

Susan B. Harden is the coordinator of Metropolitan Studies and Extended Academic Programs at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Crossroads, and is an adjunct faculty member in the College of Education. Her areas of research include community engagement, diversity, and poverty education. She earned her bachelor's degree from Clemson University, her master's degree from the University of North Carolina Charlotte, and her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina Greensboro.

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