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## Educating Leadership for Effecting Community Change through Voluntary Associations

by GARY L. THEILEN AND DENNIS L. POOLE

*Voluntary associations are an indispensable tool for placing capacity development issues high on local communities' agendas for action—issues including primary prevention in mental health and health, employment, and social justice. This paper identifies leadership problems faced by professional social workers in their efforts to mobilize voluntary associations to pursue social change objectives at the local level. Professional and volunteer performance of six leadership functions have proven effective in dealing with these problems. The authors conclude that schools of social work should take broad initiatives to refocus attention on voluntary associations and their potential effectiveness as vehicles for social change.*

### INTRODUCTION

Both the nature and extent of problems facing communities today and the mission of the social work profession point to the need for programs that enhance the capac-

ities of client populations. Vast numbers of people are unemployed, many to the point of ceasing to look for jobs. Sizeable portions of the population are disabled and left without significant social roles. These and many other problems of similar scope cannot be eliminated or significantly reduced by treating only their symptoms (e.g., child abuse, alcohol addiction, anxiety and depression). What is needed are preventive health and mental health programs, manpower and employment programs, and economic and social justice programs that foster independence and greater self-reliance and enable people to find and fill significant social roles in the community.

Yet in our current situation these capacity development programs are being eliminated or cut back sharply in existing service delivery systems. In some instances the programs are seen as frills or as too expensive. Primary prevention, for example, which holds the promise of reducing social problems by strengthening

the capacity of at-risk populations before problems strike, no longer occupies the favored position it had in the mid-1970s. Difficulties in the implementation of preventive schemes and in the measurement of anticipated outcomes have dampened endorsement and funding for this approach (Gilbert, 1983). In other instances, capacity development efforts are being undermined by the demise of funding for community organization and social action (Cox, 1984; Poole & Theilen, 1985). The community organization programs initiated in the 1960s, which stimulated the formation of thousands of citizen action groups and contributed substantially to the civil rights gains of the 1970s and 1980s, have lost their appeal among most policy makers and funding agents. Now viewed by many as dinosaurs in the history of American social welfare—and seldom acknowledged for their fundamental resource contributions of today—these programs struggle for attention and support in the social market.

An interesting corollary to this decline is the heightened emphasis that schools of social work are now giving to the highly technical aspects of community planning and administration. Though important, particularly during a period of cutbacks, this emphasis may be contributing to the emergence of a new problem in social work. Social workers have greater competency in the techniques of organizational survival but less skill in identifying the broader social issues of our time or in building structures to address these issues. Effecting social change at the community level requires skills both in the technical aspects of planning and administration and in the dynamics of leadership. That is, professional social workers at the local level must be trained not only in how to maintain and sustain a community organization but also in how to move that organization toward the larger mission of social work and the values to which it adheres. They must be prepared to work with local representatives in getting capac-

ity development programs placed high on local communities' agendas for action. This is a function of professional leadership.

Such professional leadership is not, of course, the sole responsibility of social work graduates in community planning and administration. The social work curriculum policy statement (Council on Social Work Education, 1982, p. 3) calls for all professionally trained social workers "to provide leadership in the profession's ongoing quest for progressive social change." Specifically, content in social welfare policies and services should prepare students to exert leadership in the areas of social change and social reform. Emphasis is given to developing their "influence as legislative and social advocates, lobbyists, and expert advisors to policymakers and administrators" (Council on Social Work Education, 1982, p. 10).

We argue that social workers must also have the ability to achieve social reform objectives through one of the most potentially effective, though frequently overlooked, avenues of social change—the voluntary association. Many of the most significant problems faced by professionals at the local level today—including the need to increase resources available to high risk populations, the need to develop self-help programs among these populations, the need to reallocate resources to programs that emphasize development and capacity, and the need for greater client influence in service delivery—can be approached effectively through voluntary associations. Professionals, whether they work in public or private agencies, can pursue social change objectives at the local level by forming, holding membership in, or collaborating with voluntary associations. Therefore, broad expertise and leadership skills in these areas are imperative.

This paper analyzes the potential of voluntary associations for changing local conditions, identifies problems faced by professionals in performing leadership func-

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tions in voluntary associations, and discusses examples and responses that have been effective in dealing with these problems. Possible sources of funding for voluntary associations are explored. Finally, major implications for curriculum in schools of social work are discussed.

### VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS: VEHICLES FOR CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

There are good grounds for believing that voluntary associations could provide an effective response to the present negative conditions in many communities. These are discussed below, along with approaches for providing resources for voluntary associations to accomplish capacity development objectives. The discussion focuses primarily on voluntary associations that function as membership organizations, governed by a volunteer board of directors, and have as a primary purpose the pursuit of community action goals for one or more constituencies. Voluntary agencies can also have the above characteristics even though they are engaged in service delivery. In this paper we will use the term "voluntary associations" to refer to both of these types of voluntary organizations.

#### Characteristics

Kramer (1981), in his cross-national study of voluntary agencies, reports that most voluntary agencies advocate their responsibility to empower client populations. He suggests that most of these agencies need to strengthen their advocacy function—that they should monitor and pressure government in order to safeguard and raise the quality of client services. He also suggests that voluntary agencies should defend and articulate the interests of underserved populations and involve potential beneficiaries in decision making and peer self-help activities. Further, Kramer reports that while service innovation is frequently viewed as a voluntary agency function, most innovation today actually occurs within or at the behest of the public sector.

Nevertheless, voluntary associations and voluntary agencies that incorporate voluntary association functions, tend to possess certain characteristics that make them a potentially excellent vehicle for empowering politically disenfranchised groups and for placing capacity development programs high on the social agenda. Rodman (1974, p. 280), for example, points out that "voluntary associations represent collective instrumentalities through which individuals in concert, especially those with little power or resources, may make a greater impact on their social environment than if they had acted independently." But there are other characteristics of voluntary associations that make them well suited for initiating needed innovation and social change at the local level:

1. Voluntary associations usually serve one population group or problem area. Thus, in terms of interests and values, they tend to be homogeneous and cohesive, with considerable potential for political resource development.
2. Voluntary associations have a high degree of choice in their allocation of resources because they are not mandated by law to serve a specific need in a specific way. Thus, they can choose advocacy and consumerism functions and can make relatively rapid transitions to these functions.
3. Because they represent a constituency, voluntary associations can demand change and can strengthen the positions of key decision makers within legislative bodies, public agencies, and other systems that favor similar goals and objectives.
4. As new or revitalized interest groups, voluntary associations can change a community's political environment. They can press for appropriate responses by public agencies, stimulate groups with latent interest in related issues to take action, reward positive initiatives by agencies and leaders through public recognition, and call into question counterproductive actions on the part of public officials and agencies.

5. Voluntary associations can employ a variety of strategies for change: power-coercive—through pressure on appropriate entities; normative-educative—through the use of group modes to change attitudes and norms about the benefits of citizen participation and action; and rational-empirical—through development of networks to diffuse innovations appropriate to local needs and problems.
6. Voluntary associations can encourage or demand an appropriate innovation on the part of public agencies that have the resources to carry out such an initiative. Further, in some instances, they can support public agencies in their efforts to secure resources for innovation from legislative bodies.
7. Because they involve consumers and potential beneficiaries in policy making, voluntary associations are in a good position to monitor and provide feedback on new capacity development programs.

#### Resources

If voluntary associations are to approach capacity development goals, how are they to secure the necessary resources, especially during an era of cutbacks? With the decline in expenditure of governmental funds for community organization positions, how can professional social workers help voluntary associations in their efforts toward these goals? A number of resources are potentially available for such purposes.

Voluntary associations are first and foremost what their title suggests—associations of volunteers, of people resources. Therefore the life experiences, skills, and political resources of an association's members are its most important resource. Members need to be able to carry out leadership functions. These range from identifying appropriate objectives to developing means for attaining them to evaluating the results of action. The professional worker can supplement, support, and encourage performance of these leadership

functions, but the most important resource in the association is the membership itself. In the final analysis it is the membership that must face legislative entities, public agencies, and the press. Processes leading to the selection of appropriate decision makers and leaders for the association are thus of primary importance.

Regarding financial resources, voluntary associations and community organizers working with groups interested in creating secure support for accomplishing their objectives in a variety of ways. In some instances voluntary associations have been successful in getting voluntary agencies to redirect resources to support voluntary association functions. Agencies sometimes see it as their client's interest and thus in the agency's interest to temporarily redirect staff resources during the formative stages of a voluntary association and to provide personnel to staff the association until long-term resources can be secured. Other voluntary associations, due to the size and diversity of their membership, have been able to secure sufficient contributions from members to support staffing and other operational costs. In other instances public agencies, such as vocational rehabilitation, are mandated by law to involve consumer groups in policy making and have awarded funds to voluntary associations to assist in the formation of these groups.

#### LEADERSHIP IN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Although social work has long recognized the importance of professional and volunteer leadership for effecting social change at the local level, practically no attention has been given to the subject over the past fifteen years of publication in professional social work journals. What has been written can be found primarily in textbooks by such scholars as Ross (1967), Brazer and Specht (1973), and Spiegel (1969). They emphasize that community organizers must be able to understand and work with different types of leaders, to

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handle leadership problems in organiza- tions, and to develop the capacities and skills of local leaders. However, relatively little consideration has been given to identifying specifically how social workers can support, maintain, and enhance the leadership capacities of local leaders of voluntary associations. Still, leadership is probably the single most critical factor determining innovation and change in organizations (Hage & DeWan, 1973; Kaplan, 1967; Kramer, 1981; Mohr, 1969). As shown in this section of the paper, professional and volunteer leaders in an association must have both the commitment and the capacity to move the organization toward community change goals. They must be able to perform six leadership functions: 1) define objectives and maintain goal direction; 2) provide means for goal attainment; 3) provide and maintain group structure; 4) facilitate group action and interaction; 5) facilitate group task performance; and 6) maintain group cohesiveness and member satisfaction (Stogdill, 1974). However, there are major differences between professional and volunteer leadership in voluntary associations. Community organizers in voluntary associations are involved with local leaders in performing all of the above leadership functions, or at least in making sure that they are performed. But volunteer leaders retain responsibility and authority for policy choices. A major objective of community organization practice is to develop the capacity of local persons for problem solving. While leadership roles that involve providing information, support, and feedback to enhance the leadership capacity of volunteers are seen as appropriate for the professional, roles that undermine the development of this capacity are not. The following illustrations demonstrate some of the difficulties that volunteers and professionals in one voluntary association have had in performing the six leadership functions identified above. Responses that

have proven effective in overcoming these difficulties are also identified. **Defining Objectives and Maintaining Goal Direction** Voluntary associations sometimes have difficulty setting appropriate objectives and maintaining goal direction. Preoccupation with fundraising, avoidance of advocacy due to funding requirements, displacement of advocacy and consumerism functions by service delivery functions, and lack of expertise in identified problem areas—all of these factors can create difficulties for voluntary associations in setting objectives and maintaining goal direction. Professional and volunteer leaders must find ways to deal effectively with these problems. The Community Development Support Association (CDSA), recently described in another article (Poole & Thelen, 1985), faced a problem in maintaining goal direction as it sought to develop low-cost public transportation (in a community of 50,000 persons with no public transportation system, even though many low income and elderly persons needed one to function independently), establish low-cost family education and counseling services, improve low-income housing, and establish an effective citywide emergency assistance program. The association has been organized for four years, and its membership includes representatives of low-income groups and civic, church, and political leaders with an interest in the organization's objectives. Like many new associations, CDSA faced difficult funding problems in the beginning. Initially, funds for staff came solely from voluntary contributions. The association decided that it had to obtain more adequate and continuing sources of funding and subsequently secured contracts to perform research functions for a mental health center and for the local United Way. In the process, however, some goal deflection occurred, as staff time was used to support agency research rather than the

advocacy and consumerism objectives of the association. Moreover, CDSA found itself in the difficult position of advocating for more preventive mental health services from a reluctant community mental health center that was providing part of the association's funding base. CDSA also initially had problems in getting city government to act on the association's transportation and housing objectives. Some local officials questioned the legitimacy of CDSA's concerns and doubted them as priorities for action. In the case of transportation, some officials felt that local residents would not use a public transit system if one were provided, that public subsidy for such a system was inappropriate, and that if a transit system was to be provided, private enterprise should do it. In time, however, CDSA was able to cope with these problems. Currently, a low-cost public transportation system, which may be expanded, is operating in the city and is being heavily utilized by residents. A low-cost, long-term housing rehabilitation program has been initiated, and two mental health agencies have implemented significant preventive mental health programs. Further, a citywide emergency service plan is in place. Though much remains to be done, the association has thus been able to remain focused on its original objectives. This has been accomplished by: —continuing contacts with city officials on the transportation issue by a coalition of the local leaders who were members of the association; —getting the city to conduct a transportation system feasibility study; —developing a reputation of excellence in conducting meetings and in involving citizens in planning; —undergirding the association's financial future by securing funds from varied sources including community action programs, United Way, member contributions, and special contributions to its emergency assistance program;

—having monthly committee reports on transportation, housing, and mental health, which kept the issues high on the association's agenda rather than allowing them to be displaced by "easier" objectives; —soliciting initial proponents of specific objectives involved in the organization and encouraging them to "speak up" on the issues they had raised. **Providing Means for Goal Attainment** Voluntary associations must find financial, technical, and political means for attaining their goals. Providing means for initiating programs in preventive health and mental health, manpower and employment, economic and social justice may be difficult for voluntary associations due to small staff size, limitations in the scope of staff expertise, or lack of funds for direct implementation of programs. Thus, it is particularly important that professionals be able to relate community change strategies to the objectives and unique characteristics of the voluntary association. The Community Development Support Association cited above used an innovation-diffusion-adaptation strategy to attain two of its objectives. In public transportation, when faced with a lack of support from city officials, CDSA encouraged city government to do a feasibility study and to bring in an experienced consultant to suggest transportation modes that were working in other communities and appropriate to the unique local situation. The outcome was the recommendation for a demand-responsive shared ride taxi system which required limited subsidy. This strategy broke the logjam that had developed between the association and city officials over the transportation issue, and the transit system recommended by the consultant was subsequently implemented. In preventive mental health, the association also implemented an innovation-diffusion-adaptation strategy that proved successful. CDSA was in provide program planning assistance to a youth service

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agency having program difficulties with program quality, staff-board relations, and community relations. The association recommended a self-assessment approach, with extensive involvement of board, staff, referral agencies, former clients, and civic leaders in the planning process. This approach had a revitalizing impact on the agency. Among other changes, the agency established preventive mental health programs, including family education and child abuse prevention efforts aimed at achieving the agency's longstanding (but displaced) preventive goals. The innovation (self-assessment approach) was modeled after approaches that had worked successfully in other communities. The association has also used power-coercive and normative-educative strategies to achieve its objectives. The important point here is that professionals, in helping associations attain their goals, must have knowledge of all major change strategies and feasible roles for voluntary associations in implementing them. **Providing and Maintaining Group Structure** Voluntary associations faced with multiple community change objectives, a variety of organizational maintenance needs (funding, personnel, membership), and the need to involve members extensively in decision making may create a large number of committees and task forces. Professional community organizers faced with other demands, including securing and maintaining involvement of new groups, seeking technically sound innovations, and handling day-to-day management problems, sometimes find it difficult to allocate sufficient time to staff these large structures. As a result, participants in committees and task forces may become disenchanted, and objectives may be lost. The Community Development Support Association has dealt with this problem in several ways. First, in allocating staff time high priority is given to maintaining involvement from clients and potential

beneficiaries. Second, volunteers with considerable process and technical skills are selected to chair some agency committees in order to minimize staff requirements. Third, linkages are developed with university personnel and national associations familiar with innovations in areas of concern to the association. Fourth, volunteers in the association take major responsibility for CDSA's fund raising. Fifth, care is taken to streamline the organization and avoid unnecessary meetings. **Facilitating Group Action and Interaction** In some instances a factor contributing to inaction by a voluntary association or a lack of interaction of members is the members' belief that they do not have a choice in the matter—that indeed with the association's limited resources there are no promising options for group action or interaction, or that due to the staff person's position on certain issues no options should be opened for consideration. A brief example from CDSA's experience illustrates the importance of helping associations develop choices even under difficult circumstances. Following federal cutbacks, the district office of the community action program totally defunded CDSA rather than give the association a percentage cut, as would have been appropriate. When they learned that this action was taken to prevent cuts in central administrative staff at the CAP office, the association's staff and membership were angry. But based on previous experience with red tape and maneuvering between the district and state community action offices, neither staff nor board members believed that it would be possible to get the decision reversed. In addition, both staff and board members were heavily involved in securing other sources of project funding and in dealing with client needs, and no one in the organization had the energy to take on this seemingly impossible task. Rather than preempt the association's board, the executive director suggested to

the association that the item be placed on the agenda for formal action. In a cooie fashion a board member presented the action and rationale of the district agency, its devastating implications for the association, and two alternative courses of action. When the issue was raised, strong feelings about the injustice and moral implications of the district agency's decision surfaced. The board decided to contest the decision of the agency by going directly to the state community action director. A state legislature with an important budget post was called in as an ally and arranged a meeting with the state director. Eight volunteers made the trip to the state capital and persuaded the state director to restore funding. Soon, substantial increases in funding came from this state source, because the association was perceived as competent. Thus, group action and interaction were facilitated by a clear presentation of choices. **Facilitating Group Task Performance** Voluntary associations rely on volunteers for performing major tasks. Organizational success hinges on this involvement. Volunteers, however, almost always have family responsibilities, and other interests. Frequently, key volunteers are involved in other associations. Further, many capacity development issues tackled by voluntary associations are very complex, requiring considerable research and planning before an informed action can be taken. Professional and volunteer leaders are faced with the task of using the limited time resources of volunteers efficiently and effectively. CDSA leaders have taken several steps in that regard. All of the association's work is divided among committees. The executive director spends considerable time with committee leaders, in their homes or places of business if necessary. Meetings are well organized and generally limited to one hour. Brief summary proposals are prepared to allow

for thorough and informed discussion. This conserves time for members and staff. When association members identify new issues of concern, the director makes a special effort to understand these and frequently schedules sessions with the individual or with small groups to clarify the issue. This encourages participation and aids in the development of succinct proposals for the board to consider. **Maintaining Group Cohesiveness and Member Satisfaction** Voluntary associations may lose participation if members do not perceive that the organization is providing them the benefits for which they joined—whether these benefits are the achievement of organizational objectives, personally rewarding goal achievement procedures, status and prestige, or informal friendships (Rohman, 1974). The achievement of many capacity development objectives is long-term in nature, making the problem of allocating benefits to volunteer members especially problematic. Leaders in voluntary associations must find ways to distribute meaningful benefits to members in the short run as well. CDSA has dealt with this problem in two ways. The association works on a variety of projects simultaneously, making sure that at least one has a high probability of success in the short run. In addition, the association adheres closely to its commitment structure in the conduct of business. Attention is given to broad attendance at meetings by members, and volunteer leaders are provided with technical assistance to help them perform their functions effectively. Decisions are made and tasks achieved at each meeting, thus enhancing opportunities for participation in personally rewarding goal achievement procedures. CDSA's structure and calendar of activities provide opportunities for recognition of individual contributions as well as development of support networks among members.

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In summary, voluntary associations can be excellent vehicles for effecting social change at the local level. But leadership in these associations must have both the commitment and capacity to move the organization toward the desired change. Case examples from the Community Development Support Association illustrate some of the difficulties that professionals face in carrying out leadership functions in voluntary associations and some responses that have been effective in dealing with these problems. Whether they work in public or private agencies, professionals can pursue social change objectives at the local level by assisting voluntary associations in defining objectives and maintaining goal direction, providing means for goal attainment, providing and maintaining group structure, facilitating group action and interaction, facilitating group task performance, and maintaining group cohesiveness and member satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Schools of social work should take broad initiatives to refocus attention on voluntary associations and their potential effectiveness as vehicles for social change. Social policy, human behavior, research, and practice courses should offer major content sections that help students develop competence for studying, forming, and providing staff services to voluntary associations. These courses should also stress the importance of programs that enhance client capacities, prevent health and mental health problems, and promote social and economic justice. This is consistent both with professional objectives and with the kinds of needs that communities currently face.

There are several additional and more specific implications for social work education:

1. Social Policy—Foundation courses in social policy should include an overview of the past and present contributions of voluntary associations to social change and social reform. Many of the civil rights

advances for minority groups and disabled persons in the past decade, for example, stem from the activities of what were once relatively small, locally-based voluntary associations that had a vision of fundamental social reform for the constituencies they represent. Advanced courses in social policy (e.g., those in aging, health, mental health, family and child welfare, and justice) should also provide students with similar content in specialized fields of social work practice.

In addition, social policy and social action issues should not be treated in separate courses. Rather, they should be integrated so that all students—clinical and nonclinical—recognize both issues as prerequisites of professional social work practice. As Daniel Thurst (1973, p. 89) once explained, "The fact that a social worker desires to devote himself primarily to individual practice does not relieve him of the responsibility to participate in social action as well as to understand the impact of societal forces and social policy on the people he tries to help." Too often in schools of social work unnecessarily sharp distinctions are drawn between courses in social policy and those in community organization and social planning. Faculty teaching the latter courses sometimes claim that the applied aspects of social change and social reform are "their" content, not that of social policy. In some instances this attitude robs clinically-oriented students—who may be required to take courses in social policy but not in community organization and social planning—of an opportunity to participate in an applied experience in policy reform at the community and societal level. All social work students should be able to understand how social forces, social policies, and social programs affect specific community situations and problems. Further, they should be able to analyze the issue and to help a group of clients, an association, or an agency develop the capacity to solve the problem.

2. Human Behavior—Social workers are constantly in group situations. They are

never dealing with a single individual but rather with persons whose problems in coping with life stem from their membership in primary, secondary, and tertiary groups. To effect social change, social work graduates must have a good theoretical understanding of group interaction and dynamics and be able to use this understanding in practice. Foundation courses in social work, therefore, should provide content on the behavior of people in groups and in organizations, role theory, group dynamics, decision-making, interpersonal behavior, and leadership development.

3. Social Research—Social workers should also have an understanding of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies that can be used to generate knowledge that is useful to voluntary associations, community agencies, and decision makers in their efforts to solve urgent social problems. Too often research courses taught in schools of social work are so embedded in the traditions of sociology and psychology that students leave them with little ability to obtain and interpret data that are relevant to their practice and useful to decision makers. Increasingly, their graduate-level research projects read more like arid scholasticism than a document providing knowledge that can be understood and acted upon. One almost forgets that the task of social research, as Mary Richmond (1922, p. 224) pointed out more than half a century ago, is "assembling known facts in order to interpret them for use in social reform."

4. Practice and Field—Inevitably, all social workers must deal with people who are members of families, of voluntary associations, of service agencies. To work effectively with them, and thus to achieve social change objectives, social workers must be able to form effective working relationships with these groups or their representatives. Practice courses should provide students with opportunities to develop knowledge and skills in sustaining group action in relation to a social problem or task, in fostering positive relationships

among the participants, in developing the capacities of indigenous leaders, in facilitating intra- and inter-group problem solving. Further, they should learn how to deal with conflict and to understand the interplay of people and forces in community issues.

In field courses students should have the opportunity to apply the principles of group and community work to a specific problem experienced by an association of concerned people who want to address a particular problem in the community. Students should have sustained responsibility for completing a work task that is designed to help the association solve the problem. Faculty teaching practice courses should be involved in the design of the community work task to ensure a close relationship between theory and research presented in the classroom and practice experienced by students and professionals in the field.

Graduates in community organization, planning, and administration should have a thorough understanding of major strategies of social change and their applications to voluntary associations. They should also have a thorough understanding of the potential of voluntary agencies to perform advocacy and consumerism functions. They should be aware of factors that enhance and undermine performance of these functions and approaches that strengthen these functions in voluntary systems. Funding dilemmas, goal displacement problems, problems involving previously uninvolved persons or groups, priorities in allocation of staff time, membership roles, and relationships with public entities must be dealt with in detail in the educational curriculum. Also needed is up-to-date information on preventive, employment, and social justice programs that have been initiated at the local level as well as information on organizations, institutions, and networks involved in their implementation or diffusion. Finally, field instruction should include opportunities for students to have direct experience in forming

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nce in forming

ce staffing a voluntary association with  
capacity development goals. Faculty-based  
field instruction, which involves faculty  
with students in these pursuits, can be a  
source of experience and data for enriching  
classroom discussion of voluntary associa-  
tions.

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