

Name: Douglas D. Perkins

Location: Nashville, TN, USA

Name of workplace: Vanderbilt University

Title: Professor and Director of Graduate Studies

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Please describe your primary workplace and role:

I was the founding Director of the interdisciplinary PhD Program in Community Research & Action and will again take over its direction in January, 2015. I also teach in the Community Development & Action masters program and the B.S. Track in Community Leadership & Development. All of these are in the Department of Human & Organizational Development of Peabody College of Education & Human Development at Vanderbilt. I teach community psychology courses at both the graduate and undergrad levels and a graduate seminar in Global Dimensions of Community Development. I also conduct community research on a variety of policy-relevant topics both locally in Nashville and with colleagues in Italy, China, South Africa, and other countries. I supervise and advise graduate student research projects and have organized and led student summer-long "Field Schools in Intercultural Education" (collaborative action-research projects) in low-income communities in China and South Africa.

Please describe any work you do related to public policy (paid or voluntary):

I have done research on such local policy issues as low-income housing development and neighborhood revitalization/gentrification; youth violence prevention and crime control; public health planning; and advocacy for policy change by nonprofit and voluntary organizations in several U.S. cities. I chaired the Nashville Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness and consult regularly with the city's Planning and Health Departments. I have also studied youth and citizen participation in democratic change and community organizations in China and other countries. My other main professional role in policy work has been through the SCRA Public Policy Committee which I have co-chaired and where I have helped develop Policy Position Statements and worked on issues of mass incarceration and global climate change. I serve on the board of a local nonprofit serving refugee populations. I also serve on the Planning and Zoning Committee of my own neighborhood association and in that capacity have conducted neighborhood resident and business surveys, advocated for policies that preserve and promote affordable housing, and served as liaison with the city planning department.

What training/education do you have in community psychology? How has this training contributed to your work in public policy?

My M.A. and Ph.D. were in Community Psychology at New York University in the 1980s. At the time, that Program did not have much formal curriculum on policy work although it came up in many courses and especially in specific student and faculty research projects. The best practical policy-related training I received was through my doctoral dissertation and applied research position with Citizen's Committee for New York City on the Ford Foundation-funded Block Booster Project, which worked with block associations in several Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods to not only strengthen their organizations and leadership but also address local community development and crime control policies. That experience helped me better understand the workings both of local governance at the city and neighborhood levels and of small voluntary organizations aiming to influence policies.

What other training or experiences helped prepare you for your work in public policy?

The most helpful policy experience of my career was simply getting involved in state and local policy matters in Salt Lake City while teaching at the University of Utah throughout the 1990s. After growing up in the Washington DC area and studying and working in Philadelphia and New York City, I found that living or working in a medium-sized city and state capital affords a wealth of opportunities to get involved in advocacy work on any issue that interests you and actually have access to policy makers and have an impact. I did that through local religious organizations, serving on advocacy nonprofit boards, teaching service-learning classes, and my community research.

What advice might you give to students and others thinking about working in public policy?

One of the main lessons I have learned from my experiences in all the above diverse locations, both in and outside the US, is to make useful connections with people working on policy matters both inside and outside government, including news reporters (although I have only a relatively little experience with that), and then make yourself useful to them by providing helpful research and other information. They are generally very appreciative and use the information to influence policy decisions. It is often possible to also present and publish that research in academic outlets, but it is important to disseminate to multiple audiences, requiring different kinds of products and writing, including to policy-makers and those who influence them, and not just academia.

Is there anything else you would like to say about your involvement in public policy?

Please list any professional affiliations that relate to your involvement in public policy.

Society for Community Research & Action Public Policy Committee
Urban Affairs Association
Consultant to Metropolitan Nashville Planning, Health, and Social Services Depts., Homelessness
Commission, and Mayor's Office
Nashville Housing Trust Fund Coalition
Research Core, Nashville Community Coalition for Youth Safety
Advisory Council member, Urban Green Lab and World Relief-Nashville
Have solicited, reviewed, and edited policy-relevant articles through my Editorial Board positions with:
Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society
Psychosocial Intervention/Intervención Psicosocial
American Journal of Community Psychology
The Community Psychologist

