



Penn Current

News, ideas, and conversations from the University of Pennsylvania

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Engaging globally and locally

By Heather A. Davis



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China is experiencing an enormous boom in ideas and technology, which has led to new construction and remarkable innovation.

But not all of China's growth is healthy. The burgeoning nation's social problems are increasing in scope—from the effects of poverty and orphaned children to a growing need for quality health care. In response, China is currently in the process of creating, from scratch, 33 Master of Social Work programs to train experts who will help get the country's social services up and running. This is no small task, particularly since China's social work professions were all but shut down in 1948, when Communist rule took hold.

"They now recognize very clearly that there are some social problems that neither the market economy nor the existing economy can deal with," says Richard Gelles, dean of Penn's School of Social Policy & Practice.

Gelles witnessed part of the process first-hand, when he traveled to China in October to visit top universities in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. He made the trip to better understand social work and social policy education in China, and to seek information on the general environment of social work in the country. He also attended the China International Scholarship Conference and met with the nation's Ministry of Civil Affairs to discuss a joint initiative between SP2 and the government agency.

"It's fascinating to watch a country that big and growing that fast, decide to grow out a social service component," he says. "If they do it at the same pace they're growing everything else out, it's going to be remarkable to watch."

As with other schools at Penn, SP2's influence in national and global scholarship is deepening. Researchers are working on projects in China and India (among other countries), and the school recently completed an initiative in

Pearlington, Miss., to aid in the region's recovery from Hurricane Katrina.

Gelles is considered to be at the top of his field, an internationally recognized expert in domestic violence and child welfare. Along with the deanship of SP2, he is also the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence, director of the Center for Research on Youth & Social Policy and co-director of the Field Center for Children's Policy Practice & Research.

Additionally, Gelles is the author of 23 books, including the highly influential text, "The Violent Home," "The Book of David: How Preserving Families Can Cost Children's Lives" and "Intimate Violence in Families," which has greatly impacted the study of child welfare and family violence. Gelles also helped draft the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997.

For his accomplishments, Gelles was recently honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Family Violence Legislative Resource Center.

Recently, the *Current* sat down with the dean to discuss his trip to China, the interdisciplinary nature of social policy work and how social work classrooms have changed since he started teaching in 1968.

Q. Why did you go to China and what did you hope to achieve by going?

A. Two reasons—one was in the last two years, I collaborated with Joe Sun, the deputy dean of the Engineering School, on a hurricane relief project we had in Mississippi. In the course of working with Joe, there was an earthquake in China and Joe and I began to talk about what linkages our school had with China. He asked, 'Would you be interested in participating in the China International Scholarship Council event and learning more about social and professional education, nonprofit professional education?' I said, 'Well, yes.'

At almost the same time, [graduate student] Tianxue Qiu was graduating from our Leadership of Nonprofits program and she came in with an idea that we should develop a training program for nonprofit leaders in the various ministries in China.

At this point in China's development, there was a build-out in their non-governmental organization sector. They have some fairly critical social policy problems, and we [thought we] might be able to offer some unique insight as the non-government organization sector grew. And as I learned, everything in China grows at a rate 100 times the rate we grow. I said, 'Well, that's an interesting coincidence because I had promised Joe Sun that I would go with him to the China International Scholarship Council meeting and as long as I'm there, we could follow up on this.'

A couple of articles came out about China building out its social work profession, which as I learned when I was in China, was essentially shut down in 1948, so there was no education for social workers. They did not have jobs for social workers, and did not have any particular interest in social workers.

I thought, 'Well, how do you build an MSW professional education program from scratch in a country that goes that fast?' I tried to avoid the mistakes that American universities make in essentially going over there with the intent of colonizing Chinese universities and looking at the country as a billion-and-a-half potential tuition-paying customers. I went basically to learn and to identify the landscape and the players and how they were approaching this task of creating 33 social work programs and what they were going to use as a model.

Q. How were your views about social work in China transformed by your trip?

A. You're immediately confronted with the immense growth that's happened, and the vibrancy of the Chinese economy. China and India are going to be significant players in the global economy and that's obvious the second you step off the plane.

There are a couple of other things—one was, reverse culture lag. Culture lag is usually defined as the material culture advancing faster than the non-material culture, so technology outpaces values and norms. You move so fast in so many different areas, and then there are a couple of small technological areas where there has been no movement at all and you just don't see that in other countries. [In China] the culture outpaces the technology.

I had to learn what they meant by 'a problem with migrants.' I'm used to our immigration discussion being about people from other countries. There, migrants are people from rural areas who are moving to the cities for work opportunities in the market economy. When they move, children don't have a right to go to school. Your right to go to school is where you were born, so they have hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of families who can't send their kids to school. They recognize that they have an enormous education problem and one of the ministers said, 'We'll

look back at how we treat our migrants how you look back at how you treat your African Americans.’ They have a variety of social problems that are beginning to spin off of that—encouraging migrants to move as a labor force but not providing for them as families, the uses of human services and educational services. A lot of kids end up being abandoned by parents who move for occupational reasons but can’t support their children because there are no services to support their children in big cities.

China has kids who were orphaned by disease, kids who were abandoned under the one-child policy and kids who were orphaned by changes in the economic system.

They’ve abandoned national health care and have a health care problem because not everyone can afford quality health care. It was interesting to see a country that had eliminated social work because they didn’t want to have to face up to their problems or be agitated by people seeking social justice, and now they’re seeking to create a profession that’s going to agitate and want social justice.

[I’m reminded of] the Chinese proverb—be careful what you wish for.

Q. There’s no support system in place at all?

A. Here’s their problem—they’re building 33 [Master of Social Work] programs, but they haven’t built the occupations yet for them. They haven’t got a social service infrastructure, or a nonprofit infrastructure. There’s a disjunction between the goals of creating these professions, educationally, and the actual positions of the graduates. If they don’t address that problem soon, they’re going to discourage students from going into the field because the field doesn’t justify the education. Now, we’ve done that in the States—a lot of de-professionalizing of social services so although they don’t necessarily know our history, they’re about to follow a piece of it.

We arrived [at a time when] there’s a lot of political jockeying about how this is going to be done, and where this is going to be done and who’s going to do it—jockeying between the universities in Beijing, and the university in Hong Kong, and the more cosmopolitan social workers in China who speak English and belong to the International Federation of Social Workers [as well as] the more local folks who don’t speak English and lead the China Social Work Association.

Q. What’s their plan for creating social work programs?

A. [They want to create] 33 programs at one time. In the United States, there are 191 MSW programs; that’s grown from 120 a decade ago, so we’ve added 70 in 10 years. They’re going to do 33 at once with no central guidance. We have a Council for Social Work Education that says before you can offer an accredited MSW degree, you have to cross these ‘t’s’ and dot these ‘i’s.’ They’re not going to have any of that.

Q. Does SP2 have plans to partner with any of these emerging MSW programs?

A. The first partnership we’re trying to develop is with the Ministry of Civil Affairs—the equivalent of our Department of Health and Human Services. That’s Tianxue Qiu’s project, to bring three cohorts of policymakers and nonprofit leaders, NGO leaders, over here to provide a week of intensive training and education on building a nonprofit sector that influences social policy.

Q. Is there a growing focus at SP2, both among the faculty and the students, on international social work and social policy?

A. The oldest and most respected international social worker is Richard Estes and he was doing it long before I came. Irene Wong, who was educated in Hong Kong, goes back and forth to China every year. A number of our new hires—Femida Handy from India via Toronto, TJ Ghose from India via a program in the States, bring an international world view to the program. Kenwyn Smith is deeply involved in projects in India. Ram Cnaan has been both to India and Korea. The combination of new faculty energy and more senior faculty interests have coincided with more applicants. It’s bubbled up to me.

The biggest dilemma that we face is one that we faced when I became dean: How do you handle financial aid for international students? Last time we checked, I think nine out of 12 schools at Penn do not offer financial aid for international students. There’s a reason for that, and that is international students have to show that they have the financial wherewithal to come and study here. We’ve sort of finessed the problem by offering financial aid to international students because I didn’t think we could sustain ourselves offering international education only for the rich. There’s pushback on both fronts—pushback on financial aid and pushback on thinking about China. The latter pushback is, ‘Shouldn’t we be devoting our scarce energies and resources to West Philadelphia and North Philadelphia? Aren’t there enough social problems in the United States? Why do we have to travel halfway around the

world?’ The corollary is, ‘Since American students come to us with significant debt that international students don’t have, why are we spreading a very finite resource even thinner?’ The answer to both questions, to me, is the same: You ignore the rest of the world at your peril. If you claim to stand for social justice, how do you turn your back on the rest of the world? Say we’re too busy with West Philadelphia and aren’t going to concern ourselves with social justice issues, and housing issues and educational issues and healthcare issues in China, India, Korea, Botswana? I’m a realist, and the realist says you avoid global engagement at your peril.

Q. But Penn is able to do both local and international work. There are researchers here who are focused on local issues.

A. Well, I am. I spend most of my time on child welfare issues, which is very much a local issue. I’ve done some international work, but a lot of my knowledge doesn’t translate well into other countries. But AIDS is a transcendent social problem. Poverty and hunger are transcendent social problems. They don’t just occur here. When we went to Pearlington, and spent two-and-a-half years in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, we sort of cast the die that said we’ve got to go where problems are.

Q. SP2 has a ton of interdisciplinary centers and initiatives. Did you want to talk about some of those?

A. Dennis Culhane’s work on the homeless is being built into the Obama Administration’s policies on dealing with the homeless. Jeff Draine’s work on prisoner release is absolutely necessary, given that we’re in a society that locks up more people per thousand than any society ever—and they don’t stay locked up, so how do you integrate them back into the society? Susan Sorenson has taken the Evelyn Jacobs Ortner Center on Family Violence and really made it a research and service presence, which we haven’t had before.

The one praise that I like to devote to the School is we may be the most interdisciplinary school at Penn. Every one of our standing faculty is involved with one or more schools. Everyone takes that involvement and links that to some aspect of community engagement—national, local, international. We leverage a very small number of resources into a lot of impact activities. Budgetarily, we are the smallest school at Penn, but we leverage those tiny dollars into a lot of engagement.

Q. What is it about social work or social policy that makes it so conducive to this interdisciplinary work?

A. People don’t live in one system, and social problems are never solved in one system. A housing problem is not just a housing problem. It’s a hunger problem, it’s an employment problem, it’s a poverty problem, it could be a mental illness problem. The populations and problems we’re interested in transcend systems. They also transcend disciplines. To really deal with social problems, you have to understand that they are multidisciplinary in their nature and they require a multidisciplinary response, and a multi-institutional response. You can’t just respond with clinical social work. You need a policy. You need research. Somebody has to deliver that and it’s delivered within an institutional setting. Somebody has to fund it, and you talk about government funding, which is social policy, or philanthropic funding. I learned that lesson in child maltreatment. I’m a sociologist—I need to work with lawyers, physicians, policymakers and those who understand the mental health system. Penn was the only place where I could expect to have those collaborations.

Q. That’s what drew you here?

A. That’s what drew me here. I really did have the conversation with the then-President and Provost and said, ‘Look, I don’t want to be a dean of a single disciplinary school. If I’m going to be a dean, I want to be a dean of a school that marshals its research and expertise into systemic solutions, which means we’re going to need more degree programs and more research.’ The Penn Compact is what we do.

Q. How does SP2 maintain its uniqueness in such a big place?

A. We try to address and solve problems that matter. We get a disproportionate amount of press coverage for our size. I would never claim that we have the best researchers on campus, but a lot of the research that we do is pretty relevant to things going on around us. We get to leverage our small size by the relationships we develop. The standing faculty is 21 people, but if you look at the collaborations of those 21 people, you’re talking about a couple of hundred people involved in the kinds of things that SP2 does.

We don’t have a big endowment, so we have to be scrappy. We have to be very entrepreneurial in finding the things that we do because we have nothing to fall back on.

Q. You've been teaching since 1968 at various places, including the University of Rhode Island, Harvard Medical School and, of course, Penn. You've seen a lot of students. What's a classroom like for social policy and practice students today, as opposed to back then?

A. In the '60s there was a certain amount of broad, grassroots agitation; a petition or protest could change the world. Today, there's less overt activism—there aren't many protests that I see on campus, there aren't many petitions that I'm asked to sign—but students are engaged, sometimes effectively and sometimes just with good intentions, at a much deeper, closer level. Instead of jumping up and down saying, 'Isn't it horrible that people are poor,' they go out and work in communities to help people link up with benefits, work their way across systems, run health clinics, link schools to communities. That's the good part.

The tough part is they're a bit more entitled. We've created an expectation of amenities and support that kids in the '60s didn't have. Without the technology that we have and without the infrastructure that we have now, you were pretty much left to your own resources. I'm not going to claim that was good, because you wasted a lot of time. It was very inefficient, but now, there's an expectation level. I'm not going to give you the 'walked 100 miles to school in the snow' speech, but we have to set boundaries more now. I think people now think all boundaries are negotiable.

Q. What are your goals for the school, both short- and long-term?

A. Right now, we're in a strategic planning process. I've never been at a school that completed its strategic plan and had to do a second one. We need, to use the term of the day, a sustainable strategic plan, that will sustain us across the retirements of our senior faculty and program leaders. Rather than add new programs, we want to make decisions about what would we have to do to put down the biggest roots. That really is in the hands of the faculty. I've said to the faculty a few times, 'I'm in my last term,' and I'm of an age where it's honest to say, 'This is more your school than mine. You're going to be here a lot longer than I am. I have a much shorter horizon, so I'm happy to help implement but you should really make decisions about the kind of school you want to be in and the kind of stats you want to achieve.'

I don't see us getting bigger. I don't see us adding multiple programs, but I see us solidifying the stature of the programs we have now and really solidifying who we are and what we stand for. SP2 has become a bit of a brand. Now we need to say, 'This is what it means to be SP2.' And I think having an entrance onto Locust Walk symbolically is really a big deal. You might not think so, but to have your back to the campus for 50 years is a bad idea.

Q. Do you still have time to teach?

A. I do. I teach child welfare, social policy in the fall and I teach the Capstone social policy course in the spring for the Social Policy degree program.

It's three hours a week when nobody can ask me to go to a meeting! I enjoy learning from the students, the interactions where they'll push me for an answer or why that answer is the answer. My goal—and I tell them this straight out—is that some of them will be leading child welfare agencies or be leading policy agencies. The goal isn't that they graduate or get good grades. The goal is that they become leaders and put what they learned at Penn into practice.

Q. Are you working on any research or a new book?

A. I just finished a book. The title of which is still very much in debate. Penn Press is publishing it probably next September, but there is an ongoing debate about whether it should have an optimistic title or a sardonic title. The original title was, 'The Third Lie—Why Government Programs Don't Work.' The goal of the book was to deconstruct why government programs didn't work and to identify the handful that did—these are social programs—and then derive from that a proposal for a social program that would work broadly rather than the patchwork of ineffective and inefficient social policy programs we have now. Unfortunately a lot of programs that look good on the surface don't end up doing a lot of good. So, this came along in fits and starts and finally, I finished it. Everything else I do, I do with my doctoral students, so I'll be the second or third author with doctoral students. Teaching two classes, and being a dean and working on a book doesn't leave time for first-author scholarship.

Q. How do you define what social workers do?

A. What we are is a bunch of people who hold up a mirror to society and point out the things that are wrong ... I think a good number of the students think it's just clinical, but before you get into the clinical work, you have to have a sense of with whom and why your time is invested.

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