

Sociology 250: Grassroots Participation in Global Perspective  
Fall 2013  
Class Meetings: Mon. & Wed. 2-3:20 PM  
Classroom: VKC 152

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### *Course Description*

This course investigates different forms of citizen participation. We will learn about volunteer and community service groups, social movement organizations, community-organizing campaigns, and nonprofit organizations that produce public goods. We will consider: How and why ordinary people get involved in organizations that address local, national, or global problems? What are the different forms of participation looking to accomplish? What counts as “success”?

*This course will not explore all social problems or make judgments about which type of participation is “better.”* Instead, we will investigate the different forms of citizen participation that people use to address a variety of social issues, and consider the benefits and drawbacks of each.

We focus on forms of participation in the contemporary U.S., engaged by people of different social and cultural backgrounds, as well as cases of grassroots participation in other parts of the world. Looking at international comparison cases helps us put U.S. citizen participation in a broader context, and shows us more about what participation is or could be. Contextualizing U.S. civic life globally helps us avoid assuming that American-style civic engagement is natural or logical for a democracy.

Many public organizations, and many nations, want to increase citizen participation. While we explore the potentials and limits of different types of citizen participation, we do not suppose that any kind of participation or volunteering is always “good for the community.” Most Americans view volunteering as a selfless and apolitical way to help people that is generally seen as better than a government-based solution. However, what if this was not the case? What if short-term “plug-in” volunteers come for a couple of hours a week to help disadvantaged teens in an afterschool program with homework, but never spend enough time with the kids to learn what kind of help each specific kid needs? What if a volunteer forges bonds with troubled teenagers and then quits after 3 months? These are among the heated debates inside and outside academia about citizen participation. This course will introduce you to these debates and encourages you to try out different sides in your own thinking.

The aim of this course is to introduce you to different forms of citizen participation and the debates about this participation. However, the course is also about introducing you to *ethnographic research*. We are often taught to look for answers to questions in books, but this course asks you to look for answers in the everyday lives of real people. Los Angeles is a fabulously diverse city with many different kinds of citizen participation, and many problems that citizens try to address.

**Everyone will need to attend at least three meetings or events of a “grassroots” civic group, activist organization, coalition, volunteer group, local political party organization, or non-profit organization that is working on some social problem.**

This is a significant commitment of time and emotional energy. If you can't make this commitment, please talk to me about finding a course that may be a better fit.

## *Course Requirements and Grading*

### **Required Materials**

*Books:* (available at the University bookstore):

1. *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. (Preferably get the version that is edited by JP Mayer and translated by George Lawrence as that is the one used for page assignments in the syllabus. *Be sure not to get an abridged version*).
2. *Freedom Summer* by Doug McAdam.
3. *Making Volunteers* by Nina Eliasoph.

*Articles:* All readings that are not in books or listed as web addresses on the syllabus can be downloaded from Blackboard.

*Read a (real) Newspaper:* (“Real” = Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, or other national/international papers with daily circulation that has an editorial board that systematically assigns and screens articles written by professional journalists).

This class is heavily based on current world events, so familiarize yourself with what's going on by skimming a newspaper a few times a week.

### **Class Participation**

Attendance: In the interest of a productive and interesting learning environment, you are expected to attend all scheduled classes and be prepared to participate (do the readings!). *The course will not be your typical “lecture” type class, you will be asked to respond to questions, share your ideas, and work with your classmates.* Generally, an absence will only be excused for university approved activities, required court appearances, religious holidays of your faith, and medical emergencies. If you are absent more than three times, 1 percentage point will be taken off your final grade per day. There will be in class assignments, both in the lecture and discussion sections, which will contribute to your attendance and participation grades.

Civility: We hope this goes without saying, but we will say it anyways: *it is important that we treat each other with respect so that everyone feels free to express their viewpoint and ask questions during class without fear of incivility or rudeness from others.* Expressing disrespect and intolerance towards others will not be tolerated. If you do not feel comfortable discussing any of the topics in this course, please come talk to me privately.

Technology: Cell phones are strictly prohibited in class. Make sure all ringers are turned off before entering the classroom. Additionally, while you are able to use your computer to take notes, please *do not browse the internet during class.* While you may think you are being subtle, it is very obvious from the professor and TA's perspectives when students are doing this. Ringing cell phones and web browsing will result in the reduction of your final grade.

## Assignments

In-Class Assignments: There will be several in-class exercises, mini-quizzes, and short writing assignments throughout the semester (likely on a weekly basis). These will generally be easy if you have done the reading and are good opportunities to improve your grades. However, they will not be noted on the syllabus and there will be no make-up opportunities.

Exams: There will be three in-class exams plus a final exam. We will discuss the contents of the exams in class and discussion sessions and will review the material beforehand. Only the final exam will be cumulative. You need to bring at least one blue book for the exams. There will be one make-up time for the midterms, set at the professor's or TA's discretion (the class is far too large to have multiple make-up times). There will be no make-up for the final exam.

Field research for this course: As the USC course catalogue promises, this course draws you into associational life in Los Angeles. **All students need to attend at least three meetings or events of a local association, write observations in notes, and produce a short memo to go with each set of notes.**

**\*\*\*You need to have contacted potential field research sites by the end of the third week.\*\*\***

*Explanation of field assignments*: At the end of the syllabus there is a short, practical guide to starting your field research. We will talk at length in your discussion sections about how to conduct participant observations and produce the notes/memos. However, below is a short description of each of the assignments related to the field work.

### A. Prospectus

The prospectus should be roughly 2-3 double-spaced pages, in paragraph form. It should include basics about your organization: **a)** its name (or pseudonym); **b)** what it aims to do; **c)** a rough estimate of participants and a description of who they tend to be (students, homeless people, people from a certain country, for example); **d)** frequency of its meetings; **e)** source of funding, if any, and if it is not too hard to find out; **f)** whether the organization has any paid employees ; **g)** whether it is a "chapter" of a larger umbrella organization, and if so, some basics from the website about the larger—state, national, or international—organization of which yours is part; **h)** a short bit about the group's history—how long it has existed, why it started, by what kinds of entities (individual volunteers or activists, a church, people who lived in neighborhood x, doctors, students, former

prisoners, the school district, members of a union, for some examples of types of “entities”); **i**) anything else you think is important; and **j**) most importantly: what interests you about this organization, and describe your hunches regarding what might be interesting, funny, sad, puzzling, difficult, perplexing, or otherwise surprising about the way this group works in daily practice.

### **B. Three Sets of Field Notes and Memos (%)**

- I. One “set” = one visit’s worth of notes that you took, which is usually at the very least 3 double-spaced pages, but can be more and should be more if possible. The first set of field notes should include all observations, dialogue, etc. that you can remember! Subsequent sets will be more focused as you discover the specific puzzles of your group that you want to investigate. These will develop as we discuss ethnography as a method in section and lecture.
- II. **By Sept 13, make sure your group has enough meetings, before it’s too late to switch groups! Remember that you might miss a meeting, or meetings may be canceled, so be sure that there will be ample opportunities to meet the requirement of 3 detailed sets of field notes.**
- III. If you go to a meeting and not enough happens for you to take notes on (it’s only 15 minutes long, for example, or only one other person shows up, or there is almost no interaction between members), then you will need to go an *additional* time (beyond the three) in order to write adequate notes.
- IV. Accompanying each of the three sets of field notes should be a memo (1-2 double spaced pages) that applies the theories we discuss in class to what you are seeing in the field site (or what you expect to see in the beginning). We will talk more about this in discussion sections.

Late Work: Unless you have arranged with me *before* the due date of the assignments, you should turn your assignments through BlackBoard by the day it is due. Assignments will be docked one full grade for every class day they are late. A “class day” is a day with either a lecture or a discussion section. Make-up exams will be offered only when students face an extremely extraordinary situation that is completely outside of their control. You must talk with us *before* the exam to schedule a makeup.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is theft. It is absolutely against university as well as class policy. We are very strict about plagiarism. It is punishable with penalties including expulsion from the university. It also is unfair to your fellow students and cheapens university life. It is easy to recognize copied material and we also use the Turnitin program to help us.

### ***Services for Students with Disabilities***

Please talk to me privately if there is anything that may adversely affect your ability to complete course requirements so that we may discuss a reasonable accommodation. Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to your course instructor (or TA) as early in the semester as possible. The DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) [ability@usc.edu](mailto:ability@usc.edu)

### ***Statement on Academic Integrity***

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General Principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, The Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/> Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://usc.edu/student-affaris/SJACS/> Information on intellectual property at USC is available at: <http://usc.edu/academe/acsen/issues/ipr/index.html>

### **Your final grade will be calculated as follows:**

<u>Requirement</u>	<u>Percentage of Final Grade</u>
Attendance/Participation	15%
Exam I	10%
Exam II	10%
Exam III	10%
Prospectus	5%
Field Notes I	10%
Field Notes II	10%
Field Notes III	10%
Final Exam	20%
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<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

## *Summary of Assignments and Due Dates*

- Sept 13** Be sure you can study the civic group you have chosen to study. It must meet required criteria (see appendix)
- Sept 18** Prospectus due
- Sept 23** Exam I (*bring at least 1 large BLUE BOOK to class*)
- Sept 25** Be sure you have attended at least one meeting/event of your civic group
- Sept 30** Field Assignment 1 submitted via BlackBoard by 1:30 PM (observation notes + memo)
- Oct 14** Exam II (*bring at least 1 large BLUE BOOK to class*)
- Oct 28** Field Assignment 2 submitted via BlackBoard by 1:30 PM (observation notes + memo)
- Nov 11** Exam III (*bring at least 1 large BLUE BOOK to class*)
- Dec 2** Field Assignment 3 submitted via BlackBoard by 1:30 PM (observation notes + memo)
- Dec 9** Extra Credit Due by 5pm (submitted via BlackBoard)
- Dec 13** Final Exam (*bring at least 1 large BLUE BOOK to class*)

## *Course Schedule*

*\*Readings should be completed by the day they are listed on the syllabus*

*\*\*It is best to bring the reading material to class for discussions and in-class assignments.*

### **WEEK ONE**

**Mon, Aug. 26:**           **Introduction: What is ‘grassroots participation’ and why should we care?**  
Overview of course requirements.  
How do I get started *no later than this week* doing the required ethnographic research?

**Wed, Aug. 28:**           **What do you think about Civic Associations?**  
Reading:  
○ Amy Gutmann. 1998. *Freedom of Association: An Introductory Essay*. (Pp. 3-7);  
AND  
○ Document on how to conduct fieldwork and write field notes.

### **WEEK TWO**

**Mon, Sept 2:**           **NO CLASS -- LABOR DAY**

**Wed, Sept. 4:**           **A Classic Theory of Grassroots Participation: Introducing Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (Please bring book to class)**  
Reading:  
○ "Author's Introduction," (9-12)  
○ Vol. 1, Part II: Ch. 7, "The Omnipotence of the Majority" and Ch. 8, "What Tempers the Tyranny of the Majority" (246-248, 253-256, 259-270 [*skip 248-252, 257-259*])

- Vol. 2, Part I: Ch. 2, “Principal Source of Beliefs among Democratic Peoples” (433-436)
- Vol. 2, Part II: Ch. 2, “Of Individualism in Democracies” (506-508); Ch. 14; Ch. 20, “How an Aristocracy May Be Created by Industry” (555-560)
- Vol. 2, Part IV: Ch. 6, “What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear” (690-695)

### **WEEK THREE**

**You need to have arranged your field site by Sept 13. We will ask you in lecture and discussion section about this.**

**Mon, Sept 9: Tocqueville on the conditions for democracy; introduction to field research**

Reading:

- Vol. 1, Part I: Ch. 5, “The American System of Townships” (62-63)
- Vol. 1, Part II: Ch. 3, “Freedom of the Press in the U.S.” (180-188); Ch. 4, “Political Association” (189-195); Ch. 6, “Public Spirit” (235-237); “Activity Prevailing in All Parts of the Body Politic...” (241-245); Ch. 9, “The Main Causes Tending to Maintain a Democratic Republic” (286-287, 301-315)

**Wed, Sept 11: Tocqueville’s argument about associations in American life**

Reading:

- Vol. 2, Part II: Ch. 4, “How the Americans Combat the Effects of Individualism by Free Institutions;” (509-513); Ch. 5, “On the Use...of Associations in Civil Life;” (513-517); Ch. 6, “On the Connection Between Associations and Newspapers;” (517-520); Ch. 7. Relationships Between Civil and Political Associations;” (520-524); Ch. 8, “How the Americans Combat Individualism by the Doctrine of Self-Interest...” (525-528); Ch. 18, “Why Americans Consider All Honest Callings Honorable” (550-551)
- Vol. 2, Part III: Ch. 1, “Mores Become More Gentle...” (561-564)

### **WEEK FOUR**

**Mon, Sept 16: Tocqueville’s Observations on Race and Gender**

Reading:

- Vol. 1, Part I: Ch. 3: Social State of the Anglo Americans” (50-56)
- Vol. 1, Part II: Ch. 10 “The Three Races that Inhabit the U.S.” (316-329, 340-345, 364-369)
- Vol. 2, Part III, Ch. 9 “Education of Girls...” (590-592); Ch. 10 “The Young Woman as Wife” (592-594); Ch. 12 “... Equality of the Sexes” (600-605)

**Wed, Sept 18: Review of Tocqueville  
*PROSPECTUS DUE* (see description above)**

**By 9/25, you have to have attended at least one meeting of the group you will study**

**WEEK FIVE**

**Mon, Sept 23: Exam I**

**Wed, Sept 25: Comparing Political Activism and Volunteering**

Reading:

- Martin Luther King Jr. 1963. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
- Robert Putnam. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital."
- Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers*, Ch. 1

**WEEK SIX**

**Mon, Sept 30: Cultivating Open Civic Equality**

Reading:

- Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers*, Ch. 2-5

***Field assignment 1 (notes + memo) Due 1:30 PM via BlackBoard***

**Wed, Oct. 2: Consequences of Volunteering**

Reading:

- Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers*, Ch. 6-9

**WEEK SEVEN**

**Mon, Oct 7: Celebrating Diverse Communities through Civic Engagement**

Reading:

- Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers*, Ch 10-end of book

**Wed, Oct 9: Is government in the way? Non-profit Organizations and the State**

Reading:

- Steven Sampson. 2002. *Weak States, Uncivil Societies, and Thousands of NGOs: Benevolent Colonialism in the Balkans.*
- Steven Smith. 2004. "Government and Nonprofits in the Modern Age: Is Independence Possible?"

**WEEK EIGHT**

**Mon, Oct 14: EXAM II**

**Wed, Oct 16: What are social movements, why do people participate in them?**

Reading:

- Doug McAdam. *Freedom Summer*, pp. 3-66.

**WEEK NINE**

**Mon, Oct 21: How Social Movements Define and Address Social Problems**

Reading:

- Mary Bernstein. 1997. *Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement.*



- Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap. 2000. *Challenging Global Warming as a Social Problem: An Analysis of the Conservative Movement's Counter-Claims*.

**Wed, Oct 23: How the Personal became Political in U.S. Social Movements**

Reading:

- McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 77-101, 126-145, 186-198, 208-228.

**WEEK TEN**

**Mon, Oct 28: Global perspective: Transnational Activism**

Reading:

- Kathryn Keck and Margaret Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders*
- J. Juris and G. Pleyers. 2009. *Alter-activism: emerging cultures of participation among young global justice activists*. (pp. 57 to top of pp. 59, then pp. 62-73).

***Field Assignment 2 (notes + memo) Due 1:30 PM via BlackBoard***

**Wed, Oct 30: The Occupy Movement: Grassroots Movement on the Left**

Reading:

- James Miller. 2012. "Is Democracy still in the streets?"
- Tammy Kim. 2012. "Race-ing Occupy Wall Street."

**WEEK ELEVEN**

**Mon, Nov 4: The Tea Party: grassroots movement on the right**

Reading:

- Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson. 2012. *Introduction: 'I Want My Country Back!*
- Skocpol and Williamson. 2012. *Ch. 3: Mobilized Grassroots and Roving Billionaires*

**Wed, Nov 6: Grassroots Movements: What Have We Learned so Far?**

**WEEK TWELVE**

**Mon, Nov 11: EXAM III**

**Wed, Nov 13: Community Organizing: Local Social Change**

Reading:

- Maylei Blackwell. 2010. *Líderes Campesinas: Napanla Strategies and Grassroots Organizing at the Intersection of Gender and Globalization*
- Augustine Ikelegbe. 2005. *Engendering Civil Society: Oil, Women Groups and Resource Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria*.

**WEEK THIRTEEN**

**Mon, Nov 18: Social Identities in Community Organizing: Multiculturalism**

Reading:

- Paul Lichterman. 1995. *Piecing Together Multicultural Community: Cultural Differences in Community Building among Grass-Roots Environmentalists*
- Paul Kivel, "Social Service or Social Change?" Pp. 129-149 in, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (South End Press, 2007).

**Wed, Nov 20: Social Identities in Community Organizing: Race and Gender**

Reading:

- Barbara Sutton. 2008. *Contesting Racism: Democratic Citizenship, Human Rights, and Antiracist Politics in Argentina.*
- Daniel Widener. 2008. *Another City is Possible: Interethnic Organizing in Contemporary Los Angeles.*

**WEEK FOURTEEN**

**Mon, Nov 25: Social Identities in Community Organizing: Race and Gender**

Reading:

- Rekha Datta. 2003. *From Development to Empowerment: The Self-Employed Women's Association in India*
- Huiskamp, Gerard. 2000. *Identity Politics and Democratic Transitions in Latin America: (Re)organizing Women's Strategic Interests through Community Activism.*

**Wed, Nov 27: NO CLASS -- THANKSGIVING**

**WEEK FIFTEEN**

**Mon, Dec 2: Technology: New Forms of Grassroots Participation**

Reading:

- Oliver Froehling. 1997. *The Cyberspace "War of Ink and Internet" in Chiapas, Mexico.*
- Guobin Yang. 2004. *Mingling Politics with Play: The Virtual Chinese Public Sphere*
- Francesca Polletta, et al. 2009. *Is the Web Creating New Reasons to Protest?*

***Field Assignment 3 (notes + memo) Due 1:30 PM via BlackBoard***

**Wed, Dec 4: Virtual participation? New Technologies and the 'Arab Spring'**

Reading:

- Albrecht Hofheinz. 2005. *The Internet in the Arab World: Playground for Political Liberalization.*
- Wael Ghonim. 2012. "Kullena Khaled Said," Pp. 58-81 in *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power* (2012).

**Dec. 7-10 STUDY DAYS -- Extra Credit Due by Email No Later than Dec. 9 at 5pm**

**FINAL EXAM --- FRIDAY DECEMBER 13, 2-4PM (Location TBD)**

## *How to Begin and Carry out Field Work on Associations in Los Angeles*

\*\*\*Many thanks to Professor Nina Eliasoph, who developed these extremely helpful guidelines\*\*\*

\*\* The goal of this project is to use the theories we read about in class to guide your investigation of an organization, and see if the theories apply in real life.

\*\*You will be attending a group as a typical participant, and should act like one. You will enter an organization as a typical member, do tasks that typical members do, and try hard not to stick out or disrupt the organization's normal process.

### **Getting Started: Finding a Group**

- If going around the city of Los Angeles seems intimidating, feel free to make an on-campus organization into your field site, but beware that it is much harder to get a useful, reflective distance on people (students) who are so close to you in so many ways. On-campus groups may be *harder* for you to study, not easier, because a lot will seem obvious and uninteresting.
- Your field site has to include meetings or events where you can observe fellow volunteers and participants. It cannot be a situation where you are working alone.
- You need to find a group, organization, coalition, or project that has ongoing meetings or events (e.g. not a single event, conference, or festival). The point is to get a sense of how a group of citizens talk and act together to address a social problem. You need to observe this over time to arrive at valid conclusions. One caution: many websites say that groups meet more often than they actually do.
- Once you found your field site (meaning you have checked in to the number of meetings/activities and they have agreed for you to attend), it would be a great idea to run it by your professor or the TA first. Please do this before writing your prospectus.
- For some possibilities for on-campus research sites, go to <http://sait.usc.edu/stuorgs/>.

### **Possible Research Sites (in no particular order):**

- On-campus research sites: <http://sait.usc.edu/stuorgs/>
- Many grassroots activism and volunteering opportunities are listed on <http://www.losangelesfreepress.com>).
- A **humanitarian** aid organization like Amnesty International or The Red Cross.
- A **charity**, such as a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, project that collects some necessity for some group, organization that helps poor or disabled or old people.
- A **political party or activist group**, such as a local chapter of a Democratic or Republican Party, or Green Party, The League of Women Voters, Occupy LA, CalPIRG, a student-run housing coop, Food Not Bombs, or any other party or activist group, **as long as it is not dangerous or violent**.
- Any **Neighborhood Council** (the address for Los Angeles NC's is <http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com/>) or (<http://www.at-la.com/@la-comm.htm>). These are all-volunteer organizations that the city government initiated to try to make governance more participatory, and get citizens involved. There are dozens throughout the city.
- Any city's organs of **local governance**: City Council meetings. In Los Angeles, those are listed at <http://lacity.org/lacity/YourGovernment/CityCouncil/index.htm>; or a School Board's public meetings.
- A **religious** organization that sponsors volunteer projects or discussion groups about social issues; they exist all over the city. **However**, a religious organization that only does religious rituals or only

runs an afterschool or weekend program will not work, unless the group discusses something puzzling about how it should be connected to the larger society.

### **Some More Ideas:**

- AIDS Project Los Angeles (contact person: Jim Williams, 213.201.1379, at [www.apla.org](http://www.apla.org))
- Korean Immigrant Workers Association (3465 West 8th Street, LA – about a fifteen minute bus ride straight north of campus) Rebeca Ronquillo, Tel: 213-738-9050 x104)
- The Asian Pacific American Legal Center (contact person: Lulu Amadore, 213-977-7500 x217).
- Amnesty International, (310)441-1712, but meetings are quite far—near UCLA.
- League of Women Voters: Students might observe and/or participate in these kinds of activities: First Tuesdays of the month, Board and committee meetings are held in the office; some days there are volunteer activities scheduled irregularly.
- You might observe a local chapter of a Democratic or Republican Party, or Green Party, or any other party or activist group, as long as it is not dangerous or violent, or city council meetings in which “the public” participate. You may study any Los Angeles Neighborhood Association (<http://www.at-la.com/@la-comm.htm>) (the closest one to USC is NANDC; check it out online. These are all-volunteer organizations; this one meets twice monthly: See [www.nandc.org](http://www.nandc.org) for more info)
- You will find a listing of many Los Angeles grassroots political organizations’ meetings in the little newspaper *Change~Links*, which can be found in cafés around town. See also its website: <http://change-links.org>

### **Asking permission to study a group, organization, network, collection of people**

Whoever you study, you need to ask permission first. It is best to phone or e-mail before a meeting of the group, organization, etc. that you hope to study, and introduce yourself briefly and simply. Almost no one wants to read long notes or hear a long run-down on why you need to write a paper. Simply say you are a USC student learning about citizen participation in Los Angeles. There are many different kinds of participation and you find this group interesting. All of this should be true, or else you should find another group for which this introduction would be true about you. Then ask if you may observe three meetings or events for a course paper. Very few people say “no.”

I assume you have no plans to publish your course paper; it is an educational exercise for a course. In the unlikely event that you really do hope to publish this paper, other rules apply and you should talk to the professor first.

### **How to act while observing your group**

- **It is very important not to disrupt the organization you study**, for three reasons: one is that if you disrupt it, you are not observing what it would do without your presence. The second is a simple matter of grace and politeness. Third, it would give USC a bad name. It is also important to stay safe, of course.
- Do not talk too much—try to talk *less* than other members do.
- DO do something helpful for your group if you can. For example, if the group is handing out leaflets, you should offer to help. If you are studying an organization with which you disagree (on one side of a political controversy), this might cause you moral problems. For example, a sociologist in the 1970’s started to study a racist organization, to learn about how people become racists and stay racist, but she gave it up as soon as she realized that she was doing a lot of work raising funds *on behalf of* this organization!
- You have probably never been told, “Don’t be a leader; be a follower,” but in this case, being a follower is, indeed, the best approach. Do not argue with the group’s basic premises (for example, if you are studying a religious organization, do not argue about its form of prayer). However, acting naïve is often a *good* way

to get people to explain activities that seem “obvious” and “common sense” to them, but might be fascinatingly strange to you!

- You are more than welcome to attend your organization in pairs or trios. However, there should be no more than three students per field site. Attending meetings together will help you think about your field site. If you choose this route, you are responsible for writing your own field notes (please see the plagiarism policy above) we *discourage* you from writing your papers in pairs or trios, however. If you really want, you might get permission, but it has to be explicit, from both the TA and the professor.
- **Be safe!** We assume you are mature, but some pointers include: Do not walk around in unfamiliar places at night; avoid big empty parking lots and parking structures. “Well-lit” does not necessarily equal “safe,” but can provide a false sense of security. If something feels creepy, just leave right away (and write about it in your field notes!). Metro busses and subway stations are generally very safe, but *getting to them* might not be. Know your route before you go (if you are taking public transportation, try [www.metro.net](http://www.metro.net) trip planner or look at a map).
- Take your field notes in an inconspicuous place, or immediately upon getting home, or right after a good night’s sleep (studies show that memory/ability to recall conversations and actions degrades rapidly, except when one is sleeping, when one’s memory stays on hold).