

Student Involvement in Community-Based Research

By Deborah Carter, Linette Fox, Thomas Priest, and Freda McBride

Abstract

Student participation in community research has received little attention either in the community research literature or the service-learning literature. The Urban Research Group model of community research includes undergraduates in two types of research: that which is linked to classes and that not linked to classes. In the research linked to classes, students learn skills that are used to write the Senior Investigative Paper. In the research not linked to classes, students learn interviewing skills and more about the local community. The needs of community-based organizations and the service mission of the university determine the amount of student involvement.

In 1997, a multidisciplinary group of faculty formed the Urban Research Group (URG) at Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU), after receiving a grant from the Council of Independent Colleges Urban Mission project. The purpose of the URG is to conduct community research for community-based organizations (CBOs) with limited resources. This article details effort to incorporate undergraduates into the community-research process.

Through advice and assistance from university administrators and the URG Advisory Board, eighteen faculty members (including a Project Director) from twelve academic disciplines have worked together to establish a very effective process for assisting community-based organizations (CBOs) in documenting their needs and concerns through research. Community leaders report that they have used the research results to create strategic plans and write successful grant proposals.

Over the past three years, the URG has completed sixteen student-assisted research projects and currently has six in process. The effort has been enhanced through the assistance of 250 faculty-trained student research assistants from virtually every discipline at the university, including six students from the Nursing Program at Queens College in Charlotte, North Carolina. The overall results indicate that the URG has not only performed well, but has also had a tremendous impact on the community.

The role of students, particularly undergraduates, has not received much attention in the community research literature (Kraft and Krug 1994). Little is known of the institutional contexts that may limit or increase student involvement, and still less is known about the impact of these on learning outcomes. By institutional contexts, we mean the needs of CBOs and the type of university and its service mission. These determine how involved students become in community research and what they learn. In the

following, we discuss the urban mission of the University, the origins and purpose of community research and the integration of students in such projects. We then focus on the URG model of community research, and the institutional context of student involvement to show how this context impacts student involvement and learning. We end with the implications for student participation in community research.

The Urban Mission of Johnson C. Smith University

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), land-grant institutions, and universities founded on religious principles embody university-community collaborations, as service to the community is the primary value articulated by all three types of institutions. JCSU is an historically Black university that was founded in 1867 to educate newly freed slaves. Its mission then and now is to serve the community by educating African-Americans, many of whom are first generation college students.

The service mission extends beyond educating students to revitalizing the urban community surrounding the university. JCSU is located approximately one mile from uptown Charlotte, North Carolina. Like many HBCUs, it sits among stable neighborhoods and those destabilized by crime and poverty. University officials recognize that what affects the university affects the community and vice-versa. A revitalization effort was institutionalized when JCSU and twelve neighborhoods surrounding the university formed the Northwest Corridor Community Development Corporation (NWCCDC) in 1985 to improve housing and attract businesses.

As part of the revitalization effort, JCSU and the Development Corporation also pledged to strengthen the CBOs in the area, through leadership development, technical assistance, (especially that involving computers), and student involvement through community service, service learning, and internships. To truly empower people, however, they must be given the tools to make informed decisions about community needs and the effectiveness of their efforts to solve community problems. Information is, therefore, critical to community empowerment. The URG formed in response to this need and discovered that many faculty members were interested in conducting research to increase their skills and connection with the community.

Community Research

JCSU is not alone in recognizing that information empowers communities. Community research has deep roots in the United States, beginning with the ecology studies done by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. From these studies, researchers learned that research could be used to solve social problems. The social movements of the 1960s sparked a revival of interest as former activists sought to make academia a partner in efforts to address inequality and poverty while, at the same time, challenging top-down approaches to development. “(Community) research has been expressed most generally as a process that combines three activities: research, education and action. (This)...research is a social action process that is biased in favor of dominated, exploited, poor or otherwise groups” (Hall 1990). Further, “Community-based research is research that is conducted by, with, or for commu-

nities. This research differs from the bulk of the research and development in the United States, most of which...is performed on behalf of business, the military, and the federal government” (Sclove, et al. 1998). The goal is to democratize the creation of knowledge in the struggle for social change.

The benefits of community research to the community and academia are now well known (Chopyak 1999). Communities not only receive information that aids in planning and assessment, they also experience a change in organization and political consciousness. The research process organizes the community as people come together to plan and implement projects and heightens community awareness of problems. Universities benefit by “adding chairs at the research table...(that) brings a valuable set of experiences and perspectives into academia” (Nyden, et al. 1997).

But what role can students play, particularly undergraduates? “As a form of service-learning, (community) research is a way...of uniting all three academic functions: service, teaching and scholarship. Whereas the service-learning movement promotes community service as a form of teaching, the (community) research movement promotes scholarly research as a form of community service. Thus when (community) research is done with students, it becomes not only both service and scholarship, but pedagogy as well” (Porpora 1999).

The role of students in community research and the impact on learning has not received much attention in the community research literature. Sclove, et al. (1998), in a review of community research in the United States, found that student interns were crucial to the operation of the majority of the community research centers they studied. Students gain research skills, satisfaction from helping communities solve problems, and become better citizens as they come to realize that problems can be solved if people work together. Some community research centers employ undergraduate students as research assistants, but most often, they are graduate students (Nyden et al. 1997).

For many years, a JCSU sociologist, who is now a member of the URG, used community research as a teaching tool in the research methods course. Students participated in surveys for the Homeless Shelter and the city’s public housing agency, among other projects. Subsequently, students were required to write a Senior Investigative Paper (SIP). In Sociology, the SIP is based on original research conducted by students. Community research provided faculty an opportunity to acquaint students with research and made the SIP class less stressful.

In the following, we discuss how undergraduates are incorporated in community research, the impact on learning, and how these are affected by the institutional context of community research. The URG model incorporates undergraduates in the research process, but community needs and the service mission of JCSU shape the involvement.

The URG Model of Community Research

The URG model of community research has three primary actors: CBOs, URG faculty, and students. The process begins when CBO representatives send research requests to the director of the URG. The director assesses the expertise needed and solicits faculty members to conduct the needed research. Faculty members submit research proposals that must include students. After the proposal is approved by URG and university administrators, faculty work in concert with the CBO and students to plan and conduct the research. The URG consists of all JCSU faculty involved in student-assisted community research. The group meets once a month to review and approve faculty proposals and research requests from the community.

There are two types of student involvement: that which is not linked to classes and that which is linked to specific classes. When the community research is not linked to classes, students are recruited to conduct interviews and enter data into SPSS for analysis. The methods used to recruit students include e-mails, bulletin board postings, and announcements in classes. A wide variety of students participate, many lured by the prospect of earning extra money (\$8 per hour).

Students get much more than money for their participation. They are trained to conduct door-to-door or telephone interviews. In reflecting on their experiences, students state that they have gained a greater understanding of the social composition of the community and some of the major community issues. This is important because most of the students are not from Charlotte and do not know anything about the local community. When people hang up or are rude, students learn about the obstacles researchers face. They also begin to develop more compassion. The interviews are unsettling when students realize that they may be the only person who respondents speak to all day. This is especially true of the elderly.

In the research linked to classes, community research is the mechanism used to teach research skills. Instead of money, students receive community service hours to fulfill the forty hours of community service required for graduation at JCSU. Students use the skills to conduct their own research for the Senior Investigative Paper (SIP). For example, the SIP process for Criminal Justice and Sociology majors consists of three courses: Research Methods I and II, and the SIP course. In Research Methods I, faculty teach social science research methods and provide an opportunity for students to get hands-on experience in community research, primarily through interviewing. In a recent project, community residents were interviewed by telephone in a study of African-American support for school bonds.

In Research Methods II, the student role is extended as students actively participate in the design and administration of the survey instrument. They enter the data into SPSS and are shown how data is used to develop and test hypotheses. Most recently, students and Charlotte-Mecklenburg police developed an instrument to survey JCSU student

perceptions of police to aid the police department in a minority recruitment drive. The director of the Police Academy came to class to explain the purpose. Based on that purpose students developed a set of questions to determine student attitudes about the police and uncover who would be most likely to join the force. They contacted instructors and administered the survey to a sample of classes.

The SIP for Criminal Justice and Sociology majors requires original research by students. With the skills learned in the earlier classes, students then design their own research projects that include surveys or interviews to support their research and analysis of the data that they generate. Sometimes, the research flows directly from their experiences in the earlier classes. For example, after participating in a survey about the services available for women in the community, one student decided to do research on the lack of services available for men who batter.

In the community research linked to classes, students learn the procedures that others learn in the research projects not linked to classes, plus they learn research skills, which are then used to develop their own projects. As a result, students become more than passive recipients of knowledge, they become active as knowledge creators.

The extent of student involvement and student learning, however, is shaped by factors outside the control of faculty: the needs of CBOs and the service mission of the university. Specifically, the need of CBOs for timely information, and the fact that JCSU is primarily a teaching institution determine the extent of student involvement.

The Needs of CBOs

CBOs use the information generated by community research for a variety of purposes. One of the main purposes is to secure funding for the organization or its programs. Granting agencies have deadlines for the submission of grant applications. For example, an anti-poverty agency needed data about community needs and how effective the agency had been in meeting those needs. The information had to be submitted on time or the agency would lose funding.

There are many jurisdictions that place time limits on the registering of public comments about planned government actions. On two occasions, a neighborhood group needed information to provide support for neighborhood infrastructure improvement. The requests from both of the CBOs were received in the middle of the semester. In both of these cases, the research had to be completed quickly and there was no time to link the research to a class. We have found that extensive student involvement in community research requires much thought and advance planning. Community researchers have no control over such contingencies.

Types of Universities, Service Missions, and Faculty Responsibilities

Stanton, et al. (1999) state that “service has come to be defined through the primary goal of the (university)...and is expressed in ways consistent with that primary education mission. As a result, liberal arts colleges, research universities, professional schools, and community colleges have developed varied interpretations of their service mission based on their primary identity....” The education mission of the liberal arts colleges is to develop the thinking skills necessary for citizen participation. The service mission is thus directed to citizenship training. In contrast, the educational mission of the research university is to expand the knowledge base. Its service mission centers on the creation and application of knowledge.

The service mission also affects faculty responsibilities. In the liberal arts college, faculty concentrates mainly on teaching. At the research institution, faculty attention centers on research. Consequently, the infrastructure support for community research will be different, depending on the type of institution.

JCSU is a liberal arts institution with no graduate programs, and no history as a research institution. Community research is further limited by the fact that faculty teach four classes per semester and receive little support for research (e.g., no graduate assistants). In these circumstances, community research becomes very difficult. It becomes even more difficult to include undergraduates because class time must be spent on developing the skills necessary for good citizenship. Given these constraints, there is little incentive for faculty to undertake community research at liberal arts colleges, especially when that research requires extensive advance planning as in the community research we cite above that is linked to classes.

Conclusions

Undergraduates have a role to play in community research. The URG model involves students in community research linked to classes and community research not linked to classes. More learning takes place in research linked to classes. Students learn research skills that are later used in developing their own research projects for the Senior Investigative Paper. However, some pedagogical goals can be achieved in community research not joined to classes. Students learn about the community and develop more compassion for others. Given the benefits for students and community, the URG has submitted a request to university officials that seeks to institutionalize community research as a service-learning strategy.

The extent of undergraduate involvement in community research and what they learn hinges on the institutional context within which community research occurs. Particularly important are the requirements of CBOs and the service mission of a university. In terms of CBOs, time constraints are decisive. The service mission of the university affects the amount of time faculty can devote to community research and therefore is indirectly implicated in student involvement and learning.

However, the transformation of students from knowledge recipients to knowledge creators in community research is service learning in its highest form (Porpora 1999). It has the potential to fulfill the most important goal of service learning: an informed, empowered citizenry.

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