Demonstrating Impact as a Community-Engaged Scholar within a Research University

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Abstract

Within promotion processes, research universities traditionally place highest value on grant funding and peer reviewed publications. In contrast, community-engaged research tends to value community partnerships and direct community benefit. Community-engaged early career faculty can have difficulty negotiating the demands required for promotion and tenure and the time and effort required for truly collaborative community partnerships. In this reflective piece, the experience of an early career community engaged faculty member within a research university is described.

Faculty members who strive to engage communities into their professional roles of research, teaching, and service face a unique set of challenges. This is particularly true in basic and social sciences, where community-engaged researchers can struggle to find their place in a culture that places a high value on rigorous adherence to the scientific method. In traditional research design, those outside academia are "subjects" that must be blind to the research process to maintain the integrity of scientific results. In contrast, community-engaged research includes community members in study design, implementation, and dissemination efforts. Although community-engaged research requires faculty to share control of the research process, working with communities has significant benefit for research, including increased participation from underserved communities and better translation of scientific results into real-world change.

Despite the benefits of community-engaged scholarship, it can be difficult for early career faculty to demonstrate the impact of community-engaged accomplishments. The standard reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT) process for research faculty most typically values research most highly, with particular emphasis on grant funding and

publication history, followed by teaching and service activities. Early career faculty members are more likely to be rewarded for peer-reviewed publications than for direct community benefit from their work (Calleson, Jordan, and Seifer 2005). The lack of recognition of community impact within the RPT process creates a conundrum for community-engaged scholars, who are most often working not only in the academic RPT context but also in the community context, which values community-level change and direct community benefit. The varying goals and requirements of academic and community realms can make it difficult for an early career community-engaged faculty member to navigate the RPT process. In this paper, I will reflect upon the process of forming my identity as an early career community-engaged scholar within a research institution. I will discuss my experience in demonstrating impact in the three areas by which I am evaluated in the tenure process: Research, Teaching, and Service.

Personal Background

I did not start my professional training with a future of community engagement in mind. I entered a clinical psychology program with the intention of becoming a scientist-practitioner in the Boulder Model (Baker and Ludy 2000), a paradigm of training that emphasizes the role of scientific research in informing clinical work and of clinical experience in informing research endeavors. Psychologists as scientist-practitioners are responsible for providing therapeutic interventions proven to be effective by existing research and for using clinical experiences to create new research questions. As in all traditional social science research, psychological research subjects are blind to study objectives to avoid bias in results. Within the research process, the role of academic investigators is to create research questions and design studies; the role of individuals outside academia is to provide data. During graduate school, I was fortunate to receive excellent mentorship in statistics and research design from experts in my content area, child depression. Through my mentor, I had the opportunity to work on several federally funded longitudinal studies with children in schools. Upon leaving graduate school, I expected to work as a scientist-practitioner, but I did not envision myself working in a primarily research position.

My professional trajectory changed significantly during my clinical internship, when I was introduced to Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). I worked as a facilitator for a CBPR project targeting bullying in Philadelphia elementary schools (Leff et al. 2010). In contrast to traditional social science research, CBPR aims to collaborate with non-academic partners throughout the research process to address issues relevant to partnering communities (see Table 1 for a comparison between CBPR and traditional research methods). In CBPR, research efforts occur through partnerships, and community members share decision making through each stage of the process.

Table 1. Comparison of CBPR to Traditional Research Methods

Traditional Research	Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR)
Academics are experts; community members are research subjects.	Academic and community members are co-investigators.
Researchers design studies and extract data from subject pools.	Community members participate in hypothesis development, research design, analysis, and interpretation.
Research is conducted to answer scientific questions.	Research is conducted to address community-prioritized concerns.
Results are disseminated into academic journals.	Results are disseminated into academic and community outlets.
Prioritized outcome is significant addition to research literature.	Prioritized outcome is social change.

My introduction to CBPR had a profound effect on my professional world view. Through my traditional research training, I understood the important role of research in understanding the human condition and in informing interventions to promote health. However, I became frustrated with the disconnect between empirically validated treatments, which are most often created in highly controlled laboratory conditions, and the sometimes messy chaos of life in the real world. In my clinical work, I struggled to translate the interventions that had been developed in university settings to the underserved children and families I sought to help. I was frustrated that despite the abundance of carefully developed health interventions available, people of color continued to suffer from health disparities. For me, CBPR as an orientation to research introduced the idea that by working *with* communities disproportionately affected by health disparities instead of *on* them, we could increase the chances that interventions might be culturally and contextually appropriate. By engaging *with* communities in research, we might increase the chance for real social change.

Although I had not planned to seek out a research faculty position in graduate school, the shift in focus toward community-engaged research changed my professional motivations.

I am currently in a tenure track position in the Psychology Department at the University of Cincinnati, a large urban research university. Like most social science departments at research-intensive academic settings, community-engaged scholarship is a relatively new concept within my department. Neither my department nor the college has reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT) requirements that specifically discuss the ways in which community-engaged research, teaching, or service should be considered. Because review committees typically evaluate faculty engaging in traditional research methods, the most commonly used evaluation metric tends to place high value on publications in academic outlets and federal grant funding. As one

example, the external reviewers in my RPT process were given my CV and a sample of my publications but did not have any information about my teaching or service activities. Fortunately, the RPT criteria for my department leave room for faculty to demonstrate impact in other areas as well. In this article, I will describe my experience as an early-career faculty member demonstrating the impact of community-engaged scholarship in the three areas required for my position: research, teaching, and service.

Research

Grant Funding for Community-Partnered Research

Perhaps the most sensitive issue for academics committed to community-engaged research is funding. In traditional research, the university serves as the funding agent for grants and routinely bills for indirect costs and fringe benefits for personnel. Currently, these rates at large research universities hover around 58 percent for indirect costs and 34 percent for fringe benefits. In traditional scientific research, studies take place in university settings and rely on university-funded personnel. Based on this model, the overhead in grants is needed to cover costs as diverse as electricity bills to janitorial staff to administrator salaries.

Community and university partners have different perspectives on overhead costs. In community-engaged research, community partners are co-collaborators, and the work is intended to directly benefit community members. As such, much of the research takes place in community rather than university settings, and community personnel dedicate time and resources to the project. Community partners are often nonprofits or organizations with extremely limited budgets; they are used to doing business as cost efficiently as possible. Because of these factors, community partners might naturally be hesitant to apply for grants with universities as a funding agent. From a budget perspective, a community-partnered research project that requires $100,000 in funding to complete would cost at least $158,000 if the university serves as the funding agent; the community organization would not benefit from those overhead costs. From the university perspective, one of the roles for research faculty is to obtain grant funding that will help to cover the cost of running a university. Even when research happens in the community, research faculty still have offices on campus that require electricity and IT support and myriad other overhead costs. Thus, universities have sound reasons for encouraging faculty to seek federal grant funding that includes indirect funds for the university.

To balance the needs of the university with the needs of my community partners, I have taken a two-pronged approach when seeking research funding. First, I have aggressively sought federal grant funding, particularly from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Within the past few years, NIH has become more open to community-partnered research and now even has some requests for proposals (RFPs) that specifically require community engagement. In preparing the NIH proposals in response to these RFPs, I have worked closely with community partners on these proposals and have included intense discussions about budget allocation to ensure that the community partner does not bear a financial burden for their part in the project.

In addition to federal funding, I have sought out foundation- and organization-level RFPs that allow community organizations to serve as the funding agent. The grants we have received through foundations and organizations have been awarded directly to community partners and do not include funding for indirect or fringe benefits. All funding has gone directly toward conducting the projects, each of which had a direct community benefit. For example, my partners in a rural Appalachian community and I have secured two grants totaling $75,000 to construct physical activity infrastructure to increase opportunities for children to exercise and to combat high childhood obesity rates. From a research perspective, we are investigating the effectiveness of community-driven strategies to fight childhood obesity.

An important aspect of the two-pronged approach to funding is leveraging the smaller community grants to apply for the large federal grants. Most NIH grants require pilot data that demonstrates the probable effectiveness of health interventions. Through smaller local and foundation-level grants, we have been able to collect data that we will next use to apply for federal intervention grants. For example, we received a $20,000 grant from our local CTSA to conduct a community-partnered investigation of Latino health in our area. Together with a community research team made up of nine immigrant Latina women, we have collected data on the health needs of 515 immigrant Latinos in our area. Based on this data, we have been able to identify major areas of need (e.g., medical homes, mental health issues). We currently are preparing a proposal to NIH to provide a community-partnered intervention based on the needs identified in our previous work.

Publishing Community-Partnered Research

Another significant area of tension for an early-career community-engaged researcher is between the need to publish research before RPT deadlines and the time required to develop the trusting community partnerships needed to conduct CBPR. Many new faculty members at large research universities have recently relocated into the city and lack the contacts and relationships necessary to begin truly collaborative research. Meeting key stakeholders and developing collaborative partnerships requires time, but the tenure clock does not stop while academics attend community meetings, perform outreach, and conduct the other activities necessary to develop trusting partnerships. Even if community partnerships end up being extremely fruitful in terms of research output, dissemination efforts will likely not be through the academic bureaucracy in time for tenure review. Therefore, a crucial task for early career faculty is to find other ways to publish in the meantime in order to demonstrate impact for RPT.

Community-engaged faculty members have utilized several strategies to expand the scope of their publications beyond direct research output. Researchers have written manuscripts describing the *process* of their research to help guide future work in their partnering communities. The process-level articles often highlight the lessons learned when working with specific communities during CBPR projects. For example, Lewis and Boyd (2013) described the lessons learned during their community-partnered research with indigenous communities in Alaska. Researchers also have provided

discussions of other challenges specific to CBPR, including trust issues (Christopher et al. 2008) and research design (Ball 2005). Related to process-level manuscripts, researchers have also published descriptions of their community-academic collaborations to contribute to the academic understanding of the inner workings of CBPR. For example, an article in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* describes a community-academic partnership between researchers, community organizations, and Somali refugee communities across the Midwest (Johnson, Ali, and Shipp 2009). Other researchers have described the specific process of collaboration that led to a successfully funded NIH grant (Yonas et al. 2006).

In my own professional journey, I also have attempted to identify strategies to publish while my community partnerships were still in the development phase. First, I have published review articles detailing the role of youth in CBPR (Jacquez, Vaughn, and Wagner 2013; Vaughn, Wagner, and Jacquez 2013). Because I regularly partner with youth to conduct research, the review articles relate directly to my research interests and have increased my understanding of the state of the field. As such, the work I am doing with youth has indirectly benefited from writing these reviews. In addition to review articles, I have also published a journal article detailing how I have engaged communities in my teaching practices (Jacquez and Ghantous 2013). Finally, I have published on methodologies that can be particularly effective in engaging community members, including concept mapping (Vaughn, Jacquez, and McLinden 2013) and social network analysis (Vaughn et al. 2011; *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*). Each of these manuscripts contribute to the impact I am able to demonstrate in my tenure application, but none of them required waiting for results of long-term community partnered research.

Although early career community-engaged researchers can find strategies to publish pre-tenure, structural challenges within universities exist. In the current generation of academia, very few faculty in social sciences were trained in community-engaged research. As a result, many senior faculty members are not familiar with even the most respected journals in our field. Another issue revolves around the fairly recent growth in the field of CBPR. Because community-engaged research has only become mainstream more recently, the journals in which I might publish (e.g., *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*) do not have the type of impact factors that typically impress research faculty.

From my own perspective, I have experienced disconnect between the work valued by my colleagues and my current research efforts. Since my graduate clinical training, my research has taken a new direction toward community-engaged work. Despite my current research interests, the parts of my vita that my clinical psychology colleagues most value are those older manuscripts on depression that I published in traditional psychology journals. When preparing my tenure dossier, I was asked to include a list of each journal in which I had published and its impact factor. Because many of the community engagement journals were created more recently, I worried that my impact factor list underestimated the quality of my work.

Teaching

Whereas community-engaged research is still relatively new among scientific researchers, community involvement in teaching through service-learning has a longer history in academia and has demonstrated positive outcomes for college students (Eyler, Giles Jr., and Braxton 1997). For tenure track research faculty, community-engaged teaching efforts can prove difficult because they tend to take more time than traditional lecture-based teaching, especially after the first preparation year. Within research institutions where grants and publications are most valued, spending extra time coordinating service and experiential learning opportunities can seem risky for an early career faculty. Faculty may need to be purposeful in identifying strategies to integrate community partners into teaching in a way that not only benefits student learning but also demonstrates impact in traditional RPT targets.

As much as possible, I have tried to overlap research interests with teaching responsibilities. Working with the same community partners on both research and teaching tasks not only helps meet community needs but also facilitates research activities. By focusing both research and teaching efforts on the similar community-partnered projects, the time I spend preparing my coursework also becomes a credit to my research efforts. To help demonstrate the impact of my teaching and add to the research portion of my tenure portfolio, I also make every effort to publish on either the products or the process of my teaching. For example, I have been collaborating with our city's health department on projects addressing the high infant mortality rate in our area. In one project, my students conducted research using health department data to uncover the social determinants described by mothers who had lost an infant. My primary collaborator at the Health Department and I have published a manuscript detailing our collaborative service learning project and its benefits to student learning and to public health (Mooney, Jacquez, and Scott, forthcoming).

The social sciences have massive potential for pedagogy that directly benefits communities. Within my own discipline of psychology, a major goal for faculty is to teach undergraduates the research method: design, data collection, analyzing data, interpretation, and disseminating results. Many community organizations have an urgent need for these very skills. Community partners most often are not experts in research and do not have the time to take away from service delivery to conduct research related to their programs. Students can provide a valuable service to community organizations by conducting research for them. This arrangement has mutual benefits. Students learn how to apply research skills to real-world problems and come to understand the impact that research can have for communities. Community organizations get much-needed questions answered.

My primary teaching responsibility is Research Capstone, a course designed as a culminating experience for undergraduates majoring in psychology. Students are required to demonstrate competencies in research tasks, including research design, data analysis, and academic writing. I have designed the capstone course so that my undergraduate students conduct research for community organizations with whom I am partnering on

my research projects. The overlap between teaching of Research Capstones and my community-engaged research has been an effective way for me to maintain community partnerships and to publish my work. For example, students in my course have conducted a participatory health needs assessment at a local elementary school. Student learning outcomes were met by using research skills in a real-world context, and I was able to publish manuscripts detailing the participatory needs assessment process and (Vaughn et al. 2011; *Family & Community Health*) and the pedagogical benefit of community-partnered experiential learning (Jacquez and Ghantous 2013).

Service

Although service activities might appear to be the more straightforward way for community-engaged faculty to demonstrate impact, service can be complicated for several reasons. Perhaps most prevalent is the struggle to avoid overextending oneself in service responsibilities. All faculty members can feel overwhelmed with service responsibilities when the primary metric for RPT evaluation is research productivity. For women faculty members, in particular, time invested in service activities has been suggested to slow career advancement (Pyke 2011). Community-engaged faculty tend to struggle with service obligations at an even greater level because community partnerships require service in addition to the departmental and university service needed from all faculty to keep programs running. For example, in addition to the departmental and student committees on which I serve, I also serve on three community boards related to my research partnerships. In order to build trusting community partnerships, I regularly deliver community outreach when requested by my collaborators. The results of each community-partnered research project are disseminated into community outlets, ensuring that communities directly benefit from research efforts. Although each of these activities is highly valued by community partners and an essential part of community-engaged work, it can be difficult to juggle these service activities over and above those expected by all faculty.

The time commitment required for service for faculty partnering with communities might contribute to the slow pace with which community-engaged scholarship has been integrated into traditional academic departments. I have struggled to balance service to the communities with which I partner and the university and department that are my academic home. No party is asking more service than is reasonable, but because I am beholden to many parties, it can be difficult to negotiate the service obligations. There are several service projects I would like to spearhead in the future, but negotiating new initiatives over and above my current service responsibilities would prove challenging. For example, I hope to receive tenure and to serve on administrative committees that will help redefine RPT processes to more formally recognize community-engaged efforts. Despite my best intentions, I am fearful that additional committees would increase the time dedicated to service to an extent that my research productivity would suffer. I expect that many other community-engaged scholars are equally beholden to both community and university service commitments, thereby decreasing the representation of community-engaged academics in administrative policy-making positions.

Benefits of Community-Engaged Scholarship at Research Institutions

Although the activities of community-engaged early career faculty members can differ from traditional academic work, research universities who support community-engaged scholarship will likely experience direct benefits. First, community-engaged teaching practices, including service and experiential learning, are associated with increases in student learning outcomes (Eyler, Giles Jr., and Braxton 1997). From my own perspective, I have taught classes, and in one case the same class, using both traditional classroom-based approaches and community-partnered approaches. I cannot overstate the qualitative difference in student learning that occurs when students apply skills to real community problems. Experiential learning opportunities tend to be highly attractive to students, so departments supporting these efforts will likely benefit from increased enrollment.

Universities also directly benefit from community-engaged research efforts through potential increases in federal funding. Grant funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has become increasingly more competitive, with some institutes funding as few as seven to eight percent of proposals. In recent years NIH has begun to place increasing emphasis on research that can translate to measurable public health outcomes, particularly in the realm of health disparities. Many NIH mechanisms now actually require a community engagement component (Hood et al. 2010). To increase chances of funding, traditional researchers have started to seek out collaboration with researchers who have established trusting partnerships with community organizations. Universities that provide infrastructure to encourage community-engaged research will be better poised to adapt to the increasing call from federal funders to work with communities and engage in translational research.

Most universities, particularly those situated within urban settings, cite community engagement as a core value. Within my own university, *community* and *collaboration* represent two of the operational principles defined in our strategic plan. Our core principles inherently stress community engagement, including "service defined by quality and effectiveness, applying the benefits of knowledge to the betterment of all" and "collaboration in various contexts to encourage the real-world application of ground-breaking innovation" (University of Cincinnati 2009, 3). Community-engaged faculty members contribute directly to these core principles; in fact, it is impossible to reach the university's community-engagement goals without faculty members who are partnering with those outside the university on research that directly benefits communities. To demonstrate commitment to community engagement-related operational principles, it is crucial that universities support community-engaged faculty. In particular, by providing mechanisms to recognize early-career faculty working to develop community partnerships, universities are building an infrastructure to grow community-engaged scholarly activity and, thereby, meeting stated community engagement goals.

Community-engaged scholarship among early career faculty is not just beneficial for universities, developing a partnership approach to research, teaching, and service benefits communities as well. Communities local to large research universities often are saturated with research; many communities have expressed reluctance to participate in research in which their communities do not experience benefits. The collaborative approach taken with CBPR is designed with direct community benefit as the stated outcome. By partnering with communities, research focuses on issues prioritized by community members, uses a contextually appropriate research design, and is disseminated back into the community to promote change. Academic faculty bring significant strengths to the partnership, including grant-writing skills and research design and implementation expertise. Working with academic partners can allow communities to more effectively evaluate programs and services and better document successes. With better evaluation, communities are better able to secure funding for interventions and other future programs.

Finally, early career faculty members who engage in community-engaged scholarship can experience unique benefits within the world of academia. Much of the work of science focuses on important questions about why and how phenomena occur. Basic social science questions are crucial to developing theories and informing interventions and investigators at research universities are conducting excellent work developing knowledge. While traditional basic science research is critically important, my passion for research was born when I experienced the potential for research to solve real-world problems. By collaborating with communities on health promotion efforts, I have the opportunity to see my work make a real-world impact. So far, the gratification of observed change and the dynamic, collaborative nature of community-engaged scholarship have been highly motivating, and I have not experienced burnout. For those early-career faculty members with community engagement interests, the potential for professional fulfillment can be incredibly high.

Conclusion

Community-engaged scholarship among early career faculty directly and indirectly benefits universities, communities, and individual faculty members; however, the reward systems within most research institutions do not recognize or value community-engaged teaching, research, and service. Many national organizations and coalitions, particularly within medicine and health disciplines, have called for reform in RPT processes and for increased administration-level support for community-engaged faculty (Calleson, Jordan, and Seifer 2005; Gebbie, Rosenstock, and Hernandez 2003; Seifer et al. 2009). Although some academic health departments have started to consider adaptations in RPT standards to recognize community impact, change has been slow and almost nonexistent among other disciplines within research universities.

I have described strategies I have used to negotiate the balance between community needs and values and requirements for promotion and tenure at a research university. Community engagement among early career faculty is possible, and faculty members can demonstrate significant impact in research, teaching, and service before applying

for tenure. However, as long as promotion and tenure is dependent primarily on outputs of traditional research, early career faculty will be reluctant to engage in community-engaged scholarship and universities will miss out on the pedagogical, financial, and social change benefits that result from community-academic partnerships.

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