Integrating Community-Based Participatory Research into the Curriculum

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Abstract

Faculty and students often express an interest in undertaking applied research that has a direct and positive impact on the community. This article focuses on the utilization and integration of a particular form of applied research, community-based participatory research (CBPR), as part of the curriculum. CBPR is a collaborative research process in which the researcher and members of community organizations work together in defining and conducting research topics in order to produce research that results in social change. An important benefit of CBPR is that it enables academic programs to strengthen linkages with organizations in the community by involving members of academia and the community in research efforts that are valuable to both community organizations and researchers. This article defines CBPR, presents methods for integrating CBPR into the curriculum, and discusses issues involving the evaluation of CBPR as a form of faculty scholarship.

Introduction

Faculty and students, particularly in the applied fields of study, often express a desire to conduct research that not only contributes to a better understanding our communities and the organizations that serve them but also improves the lives of our fellow citizens. Research projects that have direct applicability toward improving the capacity of community organizations are both meaningful to the researcher and beneficial to the community involved. A particular form of applied research, community-based participatory research (CBPR), reflects this research orientation. This article will address the benefits of CBPR for academic programs, means of integrating CBPR into curriculum, and the efforts on the part of higher education institutions to recognize CBPR as a form of faculty scholarship.

What Is Community-Based Participatory Research?

Community-based participatory research is rooted in action research and the various forms of applied participatory research derived from it. The action model is based on the work of Kurt Lewin *(1948)*. Lewin's action research model consists of a series of fact-finding, reflection, and action steps that lead to research that fosters social action. The action research model was well-suited to objectives of and thus adopted by social science researchers.

What was not strongly emphasized in the action research model was participation and collaboration with the community in either the design or conduct of research. Reflecting the heightened political and social consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s, researchers felt that research leading to social action would be more meaningful if it took place in a participatory relationship with the community or organization involved. Thus the action research model became a model of participatory action research. Participatory action research is distinctive in that rather than making individuals or organizations the objects of research, it engages individuals, organizations, and researchers in a collaborative endeavor to improve a practice or situation *(McTaggart 1997)*.

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The end results of both action research and participatory action research are the same: research that results in social change. Research conducted in participation with the community was not, at its outset, actively practiced by the academic community. Strand and colleagues *(2003)* noted that until recently nonprofit research organizations rather than academics in higher education provided the momentum for participatory research.

Colleges and universities have come under criticism for not serving the communities of which they are a part. The question arose: Why were the resources of universities and colleges not being used to improve the lives of citizens in the surrounding communities or in communities nationally and globally? Colleges and universities have responded by strengthening university-community linkages. Higher education institutions have adopted service-learning programs, fostered civic engagement among students and faculty, and established academic centers that foster university and community partnerships. These efforts have led to support for complementary forms of research such as community-based par-

ticipatory research. The relationship between civic engagement and CBPR is noted in a definition of civic engagement offered by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, which views engaged institutions as those that orient their teaching, research, and extension services to be "more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities" *(1999, 13)*. CBPR, as the following discussion will demonstrate, represents a form of research that both complements and maximizes higher education's efforts to strengthen linkages with the community.

Definition of CBPR: In an overview of community-based research in the field of public health, Israel and colleagues *(1998)* noted that the distinctive aspect of CBPR is that it is a collaborative model of research in which researchers and community members are equitable partners in the research process *(p. 177)*. Building on this definition of CBPR, the W. K. Kellogg Community Health Scholars Program added that CBPR should begin by identifying a research topic that is important to the community, with the goal of producing research that supports necessary actions and social change. For the Community Health Scholars Program this social change should lead to improvements in health outcomes and elimination of health disparities *(Community Health Scholars Program)*.

Community in CBPR is itself defined. Wallerstein and colleagues *(2005, 33)* offer a definition of community as defined in the context of CBPR:

> . . . people who have a shared identity, whether that identity is on geography, political affiliation, culture, race or ethnicity, faith or religion, sovereign tribal nationhood, institutional connections such as schools or workplaces, or shared identification with a group.

Role of the community: The role of the community in CBPR includes direct community involvement in defining the research question, collaborating with the researcher(s) in choosing research methods that are applicable to the community being studied, and community involvement in the interpretation and application of the results of the research. The participation of the community in CBPR underscores the importance of conducting research that is useful and beneficial to the community. Thus, when engaging in CBPR the researcher's orientation shifts from conducting research on individuals or communities to conducting research in collaboration with individuals and communities. This orientation embodies

an additional and fundamental shift in goals from objective fact-finding in accordance with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the researcher's discipline to purposeful research that is relevant to community members or organizations *(Minkler and Wallerstein 2003)*.

Role of the academic researcher: Given the definition of CBPR, one may question what would be the actual role of the academic researcher. In "Are Academics Irrelevant?" Stoecker *(1999)* outlined three relevant roles for academic researchers who are involved in CBPR projects.

1. Initiator: The researcher assumes more of a facilitator role than product-producing role.

2. Consultant: The community commissions the research and the academic researcher carries out the research.

3. Collaborator: The researcher provides subject matter and technical expertise while the community leader provides knowledge of community needs and perspectives.

Whatever role or combination of roles the academic researcher may assume, the goal of CBPR remains the same: to produce research in collaboration with community members that results in action or social change *(Sclove, Scammel, and Holland 1998)*.

Integrating CBPR into the Curriculum

There are two basic means of integrating CBPR into the curriculum: (1) CBPR can be adopted as a method for research projects, and/or (2) CBPR can be part of the course curriculum, particularly for courses that focus on or include research methods as part of the course content. Since CBPR is a research method, it can be used as the methodology for senior projects, theses, or dissertation research.

CBPR method for graduate students: Adopting CBPR as the methodology for thesis and dissertation research can be of particular interest to graduate students whose research emphasis focuses on social change and social action. In addition, it enables students to conduct applied research that is in part generated by and therefore of interest to community organizations that are part of the CBPR process.

Some practical considerations also make CBPR suited for graduate-level rather than undergraduate students. CBPR projects do not necessarily fit into the time frame of an academic semester. Consider the steps involved in establishing and conducting a CBPR project: establishing a partnership with a community group, working collaboratively with the community to identify a research question, choosing a research design, collecting and interpreting the data, and performing the evaluation; all of which are undertaken in consultation with community members. A CBPR project that follows the aforementioned process could easily extend beyond a one-semester course *(Strand et al. 2003)*.

Effectively conducting CBPR presupposes that students have acquired basic research skills. It is also important that students have learned or, in conjunction with their research project, are learning how to conduct CBPR. Entering a collaborative relationship with community members requires that students have the basic research skills that will enable them to competently conduct the research that is proposed. Graduate students who have reached the final project, thesis, and particularly the dissertation stage, would presumably have acquired research skills through their graduate and/or undergraduate coursework. These research skills would include traditional academic research methods such as: (1) identification and analysis of background sources (literature review), (2) collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, and (3) writing a research paper. When working with community members, students also need to have expertise in interviewing, survey techniques, and conducting focus groups *(Kravetz 2004)*.

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CBPR method for undergraduate students: This is not to say that undergraduate students should be excluded from learning and using CBPR, and there are certainly examples of successful CBPR courses offered at the undergraduate level *(Hammond et al. 2005; Paul 2006)*. Advanced undergraduate students may also be involved in conducting projects as part of their seminar or capstone courses

or participating in internships or service-learning programs that allow for a more extended project as part of the service-learning or internship experience. Again, the same caveat applies: students should have an understanding of research methods, have acquired knowledge of or be concurrently learning how to conduct CBPR, and be able to work within a time frame that allows a CBPR project to be completed.

Developing and adopting a CBPR course is a second means of integrating CBPR into the curriculum. CBPR courses can be offered as stand-alone courses; however, research courses are most likely to reflect the research methods commonly used for a given discipline. Therefore, it is not always possible to introduce a dedicated CBPR course into the curriculum. Another approach would be to incorporate CBPR as part of a research methods course. While CBPR can be introduced in a general research methods course, courses that focus on applied research are more closely aligned with the principles and methods of CBPR and thus can more readily adopt CBPR as a component of the course.

Dedicated CBPR courses: There are examples of dedicated CBPR courses in the social sciences and community health at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) provides a list of syllabi for CBPR courses on its Web site. The courses are offered in public health, community health, social work, sociology, and urban planning. University of Michigan offers a community-based research course that is an interdisciplinary seminar team-taught by faculty in urban planning, sociology, social work and psychology, and health behavior and health education. This course incorporates the differing approaches to conducting CBPR represented by the various disciplines. The course is intended not only to teach students about CBPR but also to provide a means for strengthening and supporting CBPR at the university level *(Checkoway et al. 1998)*.

CBPR in health disciplines: Health care is an academic area that has been actively involved in the promotion and adoption of CBPR. Organizations such as the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) serve as advocates, as well as a resource, for CBPR. The Community-Engaged Scholarship for Health Collaborative funded by the U.S. Department of Education consists of ten health professional schools whose goal is to build capacity for community-based research as well as other forms of

community-based scholarship *(Community-Campus Partnerships for Health 2006)*. The literature and conference presentations on CBPR indicate that a number of faculty and researchers in various health care disciplines, including community medicine, allied health, health education, and public health, are actively involved in CBPR projects. The list of CBPR-related syllabi provided by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health demonstrates that health care faculty, as well as social sciences faculty, encourage students through courses and research projects to learn about and engage in CBPR. University of Washington, Tufts University, University of North Carolina, and University of Toronto provide examples of public health programs that offer community-based participatory and/or participatory research courses. At University of Toronto, the Wellesley Central Health Corporation and the University College have formed a partnership that is designed to introduce students to CBPR and provide an opportunity for students to become involved in CBPR projects.

CBPR in other disciplines: Sociology, anthropology, and social work programs have also demonstrated a strong interest in integrating CBPR courses into the curriculum. For example, Loyola University offers an "Engaged Methodologies" course, which uses collaborative policy research models developed by the Policy Action Research Group and the Loyola Center for Urban Research and Learning. The Policy Action Research Group is a consortium of community-based nonprofit organizations and universities in the Chicago area, including Chicago State University, DePaul University, Loyola University, National-Louis University, and University of Illinois, Chicago. The Policy Action Research Group's purpose is to foster collaborative community-based research between university researchers (faculty and students) and community organizations.

The Bonner Foundation, with a matching grant from the Corporation for National Service, is spearheading the National Higher Education Community Research Project (CRP). The project involves a consortium of diverse colleges and universities from twelve states in developing a community-based research network. The objectives of the project include incorporating community-based research into existing courses or creating new courses in CRP and creating campus-based community research centers.

Although integration of CBPR into the curriculum either as part of a formal research requirement or coursework is the recommended

course of action, intermediate options can also be pursued. As an alternative to formally adopting a course in CBPR, an independent study can allow interested students to learn about and practice CBPR. Students can also partner with existing academic centers that are involved in community-based projects. Academic centers often have established networks and ongoing service or research projects with community organizations. Logistically, teaming with a research center offers students an opportunity to become part of an existing community-based project or research effort and lessens the time commitment and potential uncertainties of launching a new CBPR project.

CBPR and Faculty Scholarship

For faculty there is concern over whether or not CBPR holds the same value as traditional research in tenure and promotion decisions. Advocates of CBPR cite Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate (1990)* as a basis for broadening the concept of scholarly research to include the scholarship of application, or what is also referred to as the scholarship of engagement *(Calleson, Jordan, and Seifer 2005; Strand et al. 2003)*. As Boyer states,

> The application of knowledge moves toward engagement as the scholar asks, "How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? How can it be helpful to individuals as well as institutions?" *(21)*

Scholarship Reconsidered has been positively received by academe, and many colleges and universities have adopted the Boyer model in the faculty review, promotion, and tenure process. Nonetheless, this model is not always applied in evaluating faculty research. This is particularly true for nontraditional research, such as CBPR, which often falls into the category of the scholarship of application. As Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff noted in *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate,* the results of applied research are sometimes presented through public lectures, interviews, or articles in newspapers rather than in peer-reviewed journals *(1997, 38)*. As a consequence, the faculty reward system does not always foster involvement in community outreach efforts, be they teaching or research. Likewise, tenure and promotion decisions continue to favor traditional research that is more acceptable for publication in peer-reviewed journals rather than research that addresses issues of importance to the community *(Calleson, Jordan, and Seifer 2005)*.

The importance of publications becomes more pronounced in research-extensive universities where peer-reviewed publication, often in specific journals, and grant funding remain important criteria for gaining tenure and promotion. In addition, because faculty are trained in and familiar with traditional forms of research that are reflective of the scholarship of discovery, faculty review committees and administration tend to view CBPR activities as "service" rather than scholarship *(Strand et al. 2003)*. Complicating this lack of understanding of CBPR is the difficulty faculty may have in assessing the outcomes of the scholarship *(Brailow 2005)*. Assessment of alternate forms of scholarship, such as CBPR, is further hindered by the absence of clear guidelines to assist faculty in their review of applied scholarship.

> *"An increasing number of scholarly journals in the social and behavioral sciences, public and community health, and public and nonprofit administration have an interest in and publish articles on CBPR."*

Guidelines for critically evaluating CBPR: Cognizant of the need to establish guidelines for critically evaluating CBPR and related forms of applied scholarship, Calleson, Jordan, and Seifer *(2005, 318)* proposed that community-based scholarship be evaluated in accordance with three primary products:

1. *Peer-reviewed articles*: An increasing number of scholarly journals in the social and behavioral sciences, public and community health, and public and nonprofit administration have an interest in and publish articles on CBPR.[1]

2. *Applied products*: This includes results of intervention programs, research that affects policy development at all levels of government, training materials, and resource guides. Applied products would be evaluated according to such criteria as involving a higher level of discipline-related experiences, having a positive impact on organizations and/or the community, and having beneficial outcomes, such as improved health of individuals or learning outcomes of students.

3. *Community-dissemination products*: Examples of community-dissemination products include convening and/or leading community forums, presentations to policymakers, and presentations to community groups. The evaluation of community-dissemination products could involve evaluation by participants in the community as well as peers within the academic institution.

Under the broader umbrella of the scholarship of engagement, the National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement offers external peer review and an evaluation of faculty activities in this area, with criteria for evaluation available on its Web site *(Clearinghouse for the Scholarship of Engagement 2002)*. The National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement also provides assistance to colleges and universities who want to strengthen campus efforts in the scholarship of engagement.

It is not only at the university level that efforts must be directed to encourage multiple forms of scholarship. Efforts to promote community-based scholarship must also be directed at the departmental levels. At Portland State University, for example, the faculty senate adopted new guidelines that promote the "scholarship of community outreach" and, importantly, required departments and programs to revise guidelines and provide criteria that specify how different forms of faculty scholarship will be evaluated *(Reuter and Bauer 2005)*.

Conclusion

CBPR is increasingly becoming an established form of scholarship in academe. Programs can strengthen their presence in and relevance to the community by pursuing community-based participatory research. Students can apply their discipline-based knowledge and research skills and gain insight into how research can be used to benefit the community. Community members benefit by gaining a better understanding of the research process and acquiring skills in research through their collaboration on university research projects *(Strand et al. 2003)*.

The mutual exchanges that are integral aspects of CBPR serve to strengthen academic programs by establishing a productive research link to the larger community. By establishing a link to the community through CBPR, faculty and students are able to continue to engage in research projects (a) with partners who can offer experiential knowledge and (b) focusing on issues relevant to the community. Furthermore, faculty and students observe how the

application of the research results can be utilized to improve the operations of community organizations and the services they provide.

Endnote

1. These journals include *American Journal of Public Health, Academic Medicine, Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, Voluntas, Journal of Urban Health, Journal of Community Health Practice, Journal of Community Psychology, Social Science and Medicine, Rural Social Work, American Behavioral Scientist,* and *American Sociologist.*

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