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Abstract. Universities located in or near rural settings are uniquely positioned to partner with their community to offer invaluable resources often lacking within rural social service agencies. This teaching note describes a community-based research assignment implemented within an MSW advanced research methods course. The goal of this class was to teach students, through service learning, each phase of the evaluation process, and strategies to build and sustain rural community partnerships. Lessons learned and implications for social work practice and education are discussed.

Keywords: program evaluation, community-based research, teaching research, rural communities

Rural social work practice often frames social problems as community issues and therefore favors community-based approaches (Daley, 2010). Collaborating with communities through university guided service learning projects has the ability to empower and benefit students, practitioners, agencies, communities, and universities. Social work education has a long tradition of using sustainable methods through community-based learning assignments. Community partnerships provide applied learning opportunities for students, technical services to community organizations, and fresh practice perspectives to faculty. This call for universities to address social injustices in their surrounding communities (Schultz, Israel, Selig, & Bayer, 1999) is consistent with the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (1998) which emphasizes social workers' need to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged groups.

Often, emphasis is placed on volunteerism and informal networks in rural settings to address the needs of its members (Templeman, 2005). Therefore, rural university-community partnerships are even more important because such reciprocal relationships can build sustainable partnerships (Thomas, Albaugh, & Albaugh, 2003) that can positively affect all key stakeholders.

Universities providing public service through community-based learning can become extensions of that community (Templeman, 2005). The obvious community benefit from this arrangement is the additional service provided to an organization that may otherwise lack time and resources necessary to make the service available; and insufficient time and resources abound in rural communities (Templeman, 2005). Organizations and communities are not the only beneficiaries from service learning because practitioners engaged in service learning may benefit through academic stimulation, and students can practice professional social work skills through exchanges with staff and other key stakeholders (Termpleman, 2005).

Students commonly report that service learning assignments grounded in community partnerships make learning purposeful (Wells, 2006). For example, these university-community partnerships promote the social work values of social justice and advocacy (Marullo & Edwards,

2000; Scott, 2008) and dissemination of knowledge, which is challenging to illuminate through in-class lecture and discussion alone. Therefore, through experiential learning, students acquire skills in communicating with different stakeholders (Berg-Weger et al., 2004; Gronski & Pigg, 2000) while providing an invaluable service to the community.

Community-based learning curricula have also been touted as necessary in preparing students for professional social work practice (Scott, 2008). Community-based learning, like traditional field placement, has the ability to integrate classroom learning with actual practice experience. Utilization of service learning in social work courses can be found in statistics, macro/community practice, advanced research methods, gerontological social work research, and social welfare policies, to name a few (Berg-Weger, Herbers, McGillick, Rodriguez, & Svoboda, 2007; Mulroy, 2008; Rogge & Rocha, 2004; Scott, 2008; Wells, 2006; Wertheimer, Beck, Brooks, & Wolk, 2004).

Service learning that employs a community-based research project allows students to utilize research skills to impact specific community agencies or social problems (Wells, 2006). Historically, social workers have been perceived as "research reluctant" (Epstein, 1987), and recent research continues to support students' negative attitudes toward research and lack of desire to learn course content and see its connection to social work practice (Adam, Zosky, & Unrau, 2004; Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001; Kapp, 2006; Knee, 2002). Indeed, social workers who do not view themselves as researchers are skeptical of the value of research courses (Anderson, 2002). A primary goal of research professors is to develop pedagogical strategies that establish the connection between research application and improved practice delivery that benefits the lives of clients. Supplementing research courses with community-based learning assignments can accomplish this goal, but with the added benefit of curtailing many social work students' intimidation of research and statistics by adding an experiential approach to learning (Forte, 1995; Hyde & Meyer, 2004; Pan & Tang, 2004). This teaching note outlines a service learning project utilized to teach program evaluation to MSW students enrolled in the required advanced research methods course and how this fosters university-community partnerships in a rural setting.

Community-Based Learning Assignment

This university-community partnership provided a community-based learning experience to graduate students enrolled in the MSW program at one mid-size Mid-Atlantic public university. Taken during the concentration year, students enrolled in this required advanced research course completed a program evaluation utilizing data obtained from a community agency. Assignments were completed throughout the semester, which guided students through a program evaluation. Students were held accountable by members of their group yet had individual assignments to demonstrate mastery of skills. At the conclusion of the course, the students presented findings and recommendations to the agency through a written report and oral presentation.

Course Description

This course was taken over a 15-week period during the spring semester of the academic year. This was the second of two research courses taken by non-advanced standing students and the only research course taken by advanced standing students. To prepare advanced standing students for this course, additional assignments, readings, and discussions were integrated into the bridge course, which was the first course taken by advanced standing students when they were admitted into the program. The focus of the course was on social work practice research paradigms, models, and methods, with particular attention to evaluation and assessment projects. The course also gave students a more in depth exploration of computer-assisted, descriptive, and inferential data analysis. In addition to work completed during the 15-week semester, implementation of this community-based learning assignment required pre- and post-course work, which will be described next.

Implementation

Pre-Course. Figure 1 depicts the implementation process, and Figure 2 presents the specific sequential steps taken throughout the process. Prior to the start of the semester, the course professor cultivated relationships with agency directors to identify a dataset. Many of these relationships evolved out of the first author's professional contacts from working in the community or through contacts with field instructors. This process began six months prior to the start of the course as considerable time was needed to develop a trusting relationship if one did not already exist, and to assist the agency with preparing a dataset.
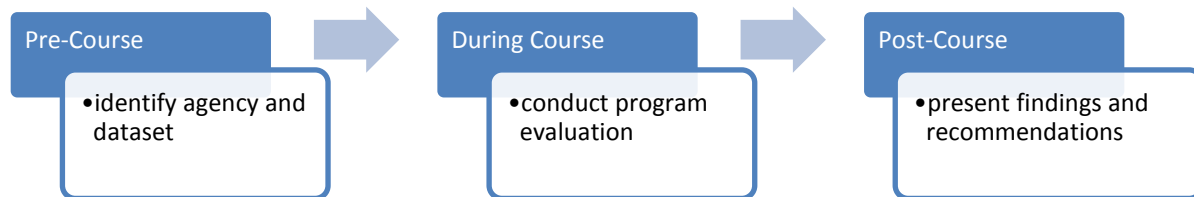
Figure 1. Implementation Process

To start the process, the professor met with the director of the agency to assess what data were already collected and currently available. During this initial meeting, the professor assessed what the agency wanted to glean from the evaluation. From this discussion, research questions were developed. Sometimes, the community agency was uncertain what they wanted to know; and therefore, it was often suggested to the director to propose a question to the board of directors, staff, and other key stakeholders.

Next, the professor assisted the community agency with preparing a dataset that included the essential variables necessary to answer the agency's proposed questions. Often during this process the agency was informed that the proposed questions could not be answered due to lack of information (e.g., data) collected. Together, the professor and director identified what could be answered with the data available. Afterward, the professor explained that it may be possible to explore the "unanswerable" questions through interviews with key stakeholders. Together, they

developed a research question to answer utilizing qualitative methods, listed potential questions to ask, and identified from whom to obtain responses.

Sequential Steps	By Whom	When
• Recruit Community Agency	• Professor	• Pre-course
• Prepare dataset and research questions	• Professor and Agency Director	• Pre-Course
• Select research group	• Students	• During Course
• Class meeting with agency staff	• Agency Director/Staff	• During Course
• Provide classroom instruction and guidance	• Professor	• During Course
• Collect and analyze data	• Students	• During Course
• Interpret findings and prepare results	• Students	• During Course
• Review and provide feedback	• Professor	• During Course
• Compile written evaluation	• Students	• During Course
• Present posters/findings	• Students/Professor	• During Course/Post-Course

Figure 2. Sequential Steps throughout the Implementation Process

Once the research questions, dataset, and key stakeholders were identified, a letter of agreement was typed and signed by the agency and professor of the course. At this point, the professor completed and submitted a research proposal to be reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board. The director of the agency shared the letter of agreement with his/her board of directors and staff, if necessary.

During Course. As this was an advanced research course, students come with basic research methodology knowledge so lectures on research design, sampling strategies, data collection methods, and data analysis options were unnecessary. However, students were instructed on program evaluation theory and the pragmatic issues in evaluation research. This occurred during the first two to three weeks of the course. During this time, students were also introduced to the evaluation project they would complete throughout the semester. Students were provided a brief overview of the agency and the research questions they would examine. Students were assigned to a research group, and the size of each group was dependent upon the number of students within the class and number of research questions explored. In general, there were typically six research questions and five to six students in each group. Student assignment to the research groups was based on individual interest in the research question. Each research group was provided a packet of information about the program and reading material about the population, issue/topic, and/or program, when applicable. Students were expected to read this material and come to the next class meeting with questions for the agency staff.

Agency staff were invited to attend the second class meeting to share information about the agency/program, collection of data, and answer any questions the students had based on their readings from the week. Based on this knowledge, students worked within their research group to develop a logic model and measurement plan based on their research question. Once students identified the data needed to answer their group's research question, they began preparing their dataset from the data obtained pre-course. Preparation of the dataset included recoding variables, creating new variables, and collapsing value categories.

Over the next eight to nine two-hour class periods, students met in the computer lab to analyze and interpret their data. The first hour was usually spent in lecture, discussion, and small-group activities to process issues that arose throughout the evaluation as well as reinforce analytical skills before having the students complete the analyses on their own. The professor circulated among groups during the remaining class time to answer questions, provide guidance, and offer reassurance.

During this time, students completed a number of individual and group projects related to and separate from the program evaluation being completed for the community agency. The assignments unrelated to the evaluation project were to test each student's knowledge and skills in designing a program evaluation and analyzing and interpreting data because, as is common in most group research assignments, the student most comfortable with math will be the student who handles the analyses. These individual assignments allowed the professor to test each student's ability to meet the course competencies. Students also developed a semi-structured interview guide to collect qualitative data from the list of key stakeholders identified between the professor and agency director pre-course. Every student was assigned one person to interview who could shed light on the qualitative research question being explored as part of the program evaluation but not assigned to a specific research group.

The last few weeks of the course were spent compiling findings from each research group into one report that was shared with the community agency in written form. This document included all the standard components of a program evaluation report (executive summary, program description, evaluation methodology, results, discussion, and recommendations). Each research group prepared a poster with the findings and recommendations relevant to their research question in order to share with agency staff during a presentation held during the last class meeting.

Post-Course. Although students presented findings and recommendations in written and oral format at the end of the course, most agency directors had follow-up questions and requested additional clarification and insight. The majority of post-course work was conducted by the professor and the length of involvement varied among agencies. In general, most requested a follow-up presentation at a board of directors meeting. However, other post-course involvement comprised presentations at local and/or state conferences, consultation with grant writing, and development of training material.

Discussion and Feedback on Attainment of Course Objectives

This teaching note outlines one approach to preparing graduate social work students for evaluation research in rural settings through the utilization of a community-based learning assignment. Feedback received from the agency regarding the benefits of this assignment is favorable and greatly appreciated due to limited resources and knowledge preventing the rural agency staff from completing the evaluation done by the students. Many rural social service agencies lack resources needed to undertake a comprehensive program evaluation, and administrator feedback support the need for rural universities to partner with organizations to help provide this invaluable resource. Further, this experience also provides students with a realistic hands-on experience that augments their research training, which also mitigates their deep fear of the subject.

Course evaluations revealed students believe in their ability to implement course material and that their knowledge of course content increased as a result of taking the course. It is unknown whether the structure of the course was the cause, but written comments suggest it was a contributing factor. One student stated, "Taught material in class thoroughly and exactly how we needed to do it; step by step which was very helpful." When asked what they liked most about the course, students reported being surprised with how much they enjoyed the content: "Stats, I didn't think I would enjoy it but I did," "My ability to learn research and apply it." Another student appreciated its application to social work practice. "Research is my least favorite aspect of social work; however, I enjoyed that the master level research class related to a community agency."

Lessons Learned

This assignment has been successfully implemented by the first author three straight academic years. Although this assignment provides students with hands-on activities to promote knowledge, skills, and benefits of research in social work practice, there were some lessons learned. First, over the years, the size of the class has increased. To maintain manageable group

sizes that ensure group accountability, it was necessary to recruit a community agency that had enough data to garner a minimum of six research questions.

Second, given the amount of pre-course time required of the professor and commitment on the part of the agency, it is important to assess whether this approach to teaching research to MSW students is viewed positively by the students enrolled in the course. Much time was needed before the start of the semester to prepare the data as often the data are still in raw form (e.g., the professor is often provided with de-identified completed surveys). Not only was it essential to set a deadline for access to the data, but having a student research assistant to aid with inputting data into SPSS was a valuable resource. Although data cleaning was done by the professor before the start of the semester and was necessary due to time constraints within an academic semester, the raw dataset was shared with the students for those who wished to practice data cleaning.

Despite having signed the letter of agreement before the start of the semester stating students will be given access to key stakeholders to complete the qualitative interview assignment, issues arose that delayed and/or prevented students' access to informants. Therefore, a back-up plan is necessary to ensure students are able to complete this assignment. This can also be a good learning opportunity and aid students in properly identifying their frustrations and not generalizing them to how they feel about research and/or the agency.

Reserving in-class time for groups to work on data analyses and interpretation was essential as graduate students often dislike group work due to their already busy schedules, which makes finding time to meet with classmates outside of class difficult. Further, students appreciated time to run their analyses in class and having immediate access to the professor to ensure they were accurately computing the statistics and interpreting the results.

Implications for Social Work Education and Beyond

The benefits of community-based learning assignments in rural settings are vast. They extend beyond the parameters of traditional academic settings by providing countless benefits to students, human service agencies, and the community at large (Hyde & Meyer, 2004). This assignment provides students with the opportunity to apply and strengthen their research skills. Upon completion of their program evaluations, students received feedback from multiple sources including the instructor, other social work faculty members, peers, community members, and professional social workers regarding their finished products. Feedback from different vantage points and varied interests provides students with a unique perspective they may not experience in other courses or assignments (Balciüniené & Mazeikienè, 2008). In addition to the increased knowledge and skills students developed from this experience, after completion of this assignment, there is a greater likelihood that students will have enhanced confidence in their research abilities. In turn, there may be a greater likelihood that upon graduation, the students will continue to employ research in their practice.

This increased competence in the area of "practice informed research and research informed practice" is consistent with the CSWE educational and policy standards (2008) as well as the NASW Code of Ethics (1999). Evaluation of one's practice, including the efficacy of programs and services, is not only an ethical mandate, but also improves service delivery and

program effectiveness, and promotes social change and economic justice (Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011). It helps ensure professional accountability across system levels and ultimately benefits recipients of social work interventions. In fact, additional opportunities for such applied research in other core social work courses at the foundation level (e.g., courses in research and macro practice) as well at the concentration level (e.g., such as the program evaluation assignment previously discussed) allow social work faculty to increase students' knowledge, skills, and competence. In turn, there is accountability to the profession and service to the community at large, significant foci in rural social work practice (Daley, 2010).

Beyond the benefits to students and the profession, the program evaluation community service learning assignment provides an invaluable resource to community agencies being evaluated (Hyde & Meyer, 2004), especially in rural settings. In many cases, such agencies face restrictive budgets that include limited funds for administrative costs such as evaluation, along with other capacity building valuations and appraisals. Upon completion of the evaluation, students provide a final report to agency directors, and when applicable, other key stakeholders. In addition to the final report, in many instances, directors and stakeholders meet with the student-evaluators to address follow up questions and may present findings to larger bodies including boards of directors, community organizations, and professional bodies. In turn, agencies use results to inform service delivery and support best practices, especially practice in rural communities where reciprocal exchanges are encouraged (Daley, 2010).

Conclusion

Offering a community-based learning assignment to graduate students enrolled in an advanced research methods course provides a real-life learning opportunity that benefits the student, university, agency, and community. Students gain research knowledge and skills while simultaneously providing an invaluable service to a local non-profit organization which is often unavailable to rural social service agencies due to limited resources. In turn, the organization is able to utilize the findings outlined in the evaluation report to enhance service delivery. These university-community partnerships may help social work departments better prepare students to adhere to the profession's mandates of using research to guide practice and practice to guide research, as the limitations embedded in traditional pedagogy may be resolved through the use of a community-based research project. Further, the rural social service organizations obtain a resource that provides them with data to utilize in order to justify ongoing and/or additional funding for their program. In the end, both the university and the organization benefit.

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