



The Third Responsibility: Students Contributing to the Community by Engaging in Community Based Research

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Abstract: This paper adds to the knowledge on Community-University Partnerships by presenting the results of an evaluation by the School of Social Work at Carleton University to engage students in community-based research as part of a required graduate level research course.

Introduction

In addition to teaching and research, service to the community through community-university partnerships is recognized as a “third” responsibility of universities. A number of studies have shown the positive outcomes for students from community based service learning and participating in community based research, (Hayes, 2006; Rogge & Rocha, 2004; Timmermans & Bouman, 2004) but there is limited research into the outcomes for the community organizations (Fryer, 2007) and some research that shows that positive outcomes appear negligible (Johnson & Rouse, 2007). The potential positive outcomes involve building community capacity through increased volunteerism.

Following a brief review of the literature on community-based research and a description of the course, this article will present the results of a survey of participant community organizations that shows the contribution the research has made to the functioning of their organization.

Literature Review

There is a great deal of literature on campus-community partnerships available in the US (Hayes, 2006; Walsh & Amis, 2003) and Canada (Andrée, 2008; Hall & Keller, 2006; Jackson, 2005; Savan, 2004). One type of community university partnership is Community Based Research (CBR) which involves research done in collaboration between the university and the community. CBR seeks to democratize knowledge by validating multiple sources of knowledge and promoting the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination with the goal of social action (Strand et al, 2003). There is a burgeoning literature on community based research. Some of the literature describes community based research projects (Flicker et al., 2006; Kelly, 2004; Kowalewski, 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Sclove, Scammell, & Holland, 1998; Stoecker, 2003;), some looks at barriers to academics and the community of engaging in CBR (Ahmed, et al. 2004; Seifer & Calleson, 2004) and others look at the ethical issues that develop when CBR projects are reviewed by institutional ethical review boards (Downie & Cottrell, 2001; Fadem et al, 2003; Flicker et al, 2007a; Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Minkler, 2004; Stocking & Cutforth, 2006). A review of community based research projects in Canada found that CBR was found to foster societal outcomes which are not perceived as being achieved with traditional research methods (Israel et al., 1998). In particular, increased community capacity (62%), plans for future projects (60%), cordial working relationships (51%), new coalitions (47%), changes in agency programming (38%) and changes in government policy (15%) were cited as concrete outcomes from the projects undertaken by our respondents. The frequency of reported negative outcomes (e.g. increased polarization, increased mistrust and alienation from funders, etc.) was low (under 2%), (Flicker & Savan, 2006).

Since 1997-98 Carleton University School of Social Work has structured the MSW research course so that students in small groups engaged in research with community agencies. An evaluation was carried out in 2004 of 60 community research projects, for the five years spanning 1999 to 2004 (Germain, 2004). The findings suggested that there was

overall satisfaction with the research course. There were however, concerns about the lack of contact between the instructors and the community organizations. It was recommended that regular contact be built into the course. An attempt was made to address these concerns of the community participants raised by this evaluation, by having the course instructor attend a planning meeting between the students and the agency.

Teaching CBR at Carleton University's School of Social Work

A letter is sent out in June inviting community organizations to submit a request for research. In August, the two instructors review the requests and select a short list of projects based on appropriateness in terms of learning opportunities, as well as meeting a need for an organization with few resources to otherwise do so. In September, the class is divided into teams of three to five students. The teams are invited to select from the approved projects, the ones they would like to pursue. A member of the team then contacts the organization and sets up an initial face to face meeting involving the students, instructor and representatives of the organization. During this meeting a contract is developed which spells out the details of the project, which tasks will be undertaken and by whom, and the timelines. The team then develops a detailed research proposal for the approval by the organizations and the instructor. The proposals are presented in class for discussion and feedback. The teams also develop an ethics review proposal for approval by the Ethic Review Board of the university. In January, once the proposals have cleared ethics, the teams start gathering and analyzing data. The teams then write the final report often in collaboration with the agency which is presented in class for discussion and feedback. The final step, which takes place in late March and early April, is for teams to present their final report to the organizations.

Methodology

In the Spring of 2007, agencies were contacted by telephone and asked to answer questions related to whether the research carried out by the students made a contribution to the organization, promoted individual and organizational change and/or contributed to a research-minded culture (Stuart, 2006). A qualitative methodology (Patton, 2002) was used in this exploratory project. An interview guide approach was used in the interviews, so that the exact order and wording of questions was flexible and emerged through conversation (Patton, 2002). Of the 12 projects completed in April 2007, we received responses from 10 organizations. We did not receive responses from two because the contact people were no longer employed by the organization. We had a very broad range of participating organizations. Half of the organizations were multi-service health and community resource centers while the rest included a variety of agencies service serving clients with developmental, mental health, health, immigration and addictions issues.

Results

The agency contact people were asked whether they felt that the initial meeting between themselves, the students, and the course instructor was helpful in clarifying the research project. All of the organizations felt that having the instructor present during the initial meeting with the organization was very helpful. Many of the students had overly ambitious ideas of what could be accomplished and were ready to agree to much more extensive projects. The instructors' role was to ensure that what was agreed was realistic in terms of academic timelines, research methodology and met the needs of the organization. Respondents stated that "it was helpful to clarify the nuances of each (stakeholder's) perspective"; that the meeting "laid the groundwork for the project" and "got talking about concrete things that the students wanted to research and to set limits on the students (not enough time to interview a hundred people)."

In response to the question of whether the participating organizations were able to make use of the information in the final report, all stated that they were able to use some or all of the information. Several stated that they would use the information in funding applications, others responded that they planned to use the findings in staff and volunteer training, or as part of conference presentations and another organization planned to use the recommendations to refine their program.

"We will be using the findings in our application for funding from the ministry."

"We will take the results to the volunteers to discuss what can be done to address the challenges raised."

"The literature Review was helpful because they received up to date information on why they are doing what they are doing"

We asked the organization contact person what suggestions they had for improving the research process. Some of the suggestions related to the level of participation of the organization. Those organizations who took a less active role in the design of the actual research tools and methodology felt there were communication difficulties between themselves and the students. A couple of respondents said, "We would have wanted more 'check ins' with the students". This

agency contact person suggested including a schedule of meeting with students in the initial contract. Other comments included: "Another meeting in January with the Prof. present would have helped."; "We would have like more input in the development of the final report;" "We would have liked more discussion on the interpretation of the data" This comment differs from the literature where community organizations did not want input into the data analysis because they felt it would bias the analysis, Hyde & Meyer, 2004. "We would have liked some input into the grades given to the students".

Discussion

The community sees this course as an asset that enables them to carry out research required by their funders. Some have contacted us wanting to be involved in their project so that they can increase their profile as research minded. The school views this course as a mutually beneficial partnership between university and community and as an opportunity to be more engaged in its community.

Conflicting demands on the students' time continues to be a challenge. This can be addressed to some extent in the initial meeting between the team, organization and instructor. Although students agree that the workload for this course is quite heavy, they also feel that it offers a tremendous learning opportunity that provides them with marketable skills. One group was able to present the results of their research at a conference launching their academic careers. The results of another group's research were presented at an international conference as part of other research carried out by the organization.

There are institutional barriers to community university partnerships. Some have been noted in the literature. The workload for faculty is very heavy. This includes administrative work; time to meet with students and agencies; time to run interference, re-negotiate with agencies and to negotiate group dynamics in student groups. Other studies have noted that an institutional barrier to community university research partnerships is the extra resources required for the development and maintenance of the partnerships, for the evaluation of off-campus student work and lack of funding for applied and community based research (Savan, 2004). Negotiating the ethics approval process has been noted by other researchers as an institutional barrier (Hyde & Meyer, 2004). While the ethics review process is certainly time consuming, it is less of a problem at Carleton University because streamlined forms have been developed. It should also be noted that the Coordinator of the Ethics Review Board spends a great deal of time helping the students through the process.

Conclusions

This evaluation has found that the agencies use the research results generated by our students in collaboration with them in numerous ways. They use it to show funders they are meeting their goals and to apply for new funding, they use the research to inform their volunteer training, others have used the research to increase their credibility with in their organizations. In this way the university is engaged with the community and giving back to the community as well as creating a dynamic environment for students to learn and become good citizens, there by fulfilling our third responsibility.

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