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From Structural Inequalities to Speaking Out: Youth Participatory Action Research in College Access Collaborations

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In recent years, participatory action research projects aimed at addressing local social issues have gained interest in academic settings. These projects can contribute to university-community partnerships, but communication about such projects remains somewhat limited. This article contributes to these developing discussions by describing how a youth participatory action research project (YPAR) supported an ongoing university-community partnership between Elon University, a mid-sized private liberal arts school, and the local public school community. This educational partnership led to the Elon Academy, a college access and success program for high school youth with limited financial resources and little or no family history of college. In 2010-2011, Elon Academy initiated a YPAR project to study the challenges limited-income, first-generation, and minority students faced on their path to college. This article describes how the project deepened university-community relationships, shaped broader awareness and local programming, and inspired a ripple effect of new partnerships that help to sustain the work of supporting marginalized students in their journeys toward college futures. It addresses the struggles faced by the project as well as the positive outcomes, ultimately arguing for the potential for critical, participatory research methodologies to serve as a particularly meaningful platform for collaboration between universities and their communities.

Keywords: University-community partnerships, Public schools, College access, Youth participatory action research, Underrepresented students

Introduction

The United States faces an educational crisis because of longstanding and well-recognized inequities in our school systems. Students who have limited financial resources, have little or no family history of postsecondary education, and/or are students of color are significantly less likely to enter and complete college. Addressing these inequities requires the collective wisdom and efforts of all those involved in the educational enterprise and not just in our public schools where national attention tends to focus blame and responsibility. Post-secondary institutions are in a unique position to not only study the issues of college access and success, but also to enact significant partnerships with local communities to better understand and find solutions to this most pressing problem.

Numerous college access programs have appeared in the last decade in response to this educational need, supported by federal (TRIO, GEAR UP), community (Rainier Scholars, QuestBridge), or higher education initiatives (Bridges to a Brighter Future at Furman University, Princeton University Preparatory Program). Some offer short-term programming to hundreds of students annually; others focus on providing extended support for a smaller number of students over several years. University-community college access collaborations may reflect the idiosyncratic needs of a given institution, region, or

school system, but most share a goal of bridging the gulf between historically underserved young people and successful entrance to college. This article examines the potential for youth participatory action research (YPAR) to inform and enhance university-community collaborations that target underserved youth by providing insider perspectives and creating working relationships that value all stakeholders' needs. To do so, it goes inside the Elon Academy, a college access and success partnership established between Elon University, a private 4-year liberal arts university, and its public school community in Alamance County. Like most access programs, Elon Academy's mission is to address barriers and bridge opportunity gaps (Boykin & Noguera, 2011) by providing ongoing academic support, college planning, individual mentoring, and real-world college experiences for participating students. As part of its 2010-11 student programming, the Academy launched a year-long youth participatory action research (YPAR) project in order to engage the voices of its most vulnerable members, the secondary students themselves, to better understand their needs and, in response, to better shape the direction of the program. This project served as a valuable tool for the collaboration, raising awareness across diverse constituents (from university representatives to school board members to families and student peers) about the challenges faced by underrepresented students on their journey to college.

We begin with background on research in university-community collaborations, as well as participatory action research (PAR), specifically. We situate the Academy program within the national and local educational context, share a brief history of its development, and offer a general overview of programming. (We provide additional program information in an appendix for interested readers.) Then, we describe the YPAR project in detail and suggest challenges and benefits that stemmed from the work based upon student, faculty, and staff reflections and on interviews with student participants throughout the year. In the end, we argue that this experience illustrates both the complexity of navigating youth-centered university-community partnerships and the potential for YPAR methodologies to enrich and deepen such work.

The Nature of Research in University-Community Partnerships

As universities focus increasingly on "civic engagement," faculty and staff become more involved in developing university-community partnerships that aim to bring together what Jassawalla and Sashitall describe as "diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination activities" (as cited in Buys & Bursnall, 2007, p. 73; Eccles, 1996). Universities have come to recognize the need for deeper connections with communities to support the growth of both institutions of higher education and the communities around them (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009). This growth stems not only from sharing resources, but also from the synergy that can happen when disparate perspectives come together around a mutual goal, topic, or interest. Such partnerships create a common ground where the unique capacities of both university and community partners help to shape possibilities that might not exist without such collaborations. This relationship problematizes the traditional privileged position of the university as the solitary center of knowledge production, opening the door instead to other funds of knowledge and recognizing the often-overlooked value of community-based expertise (Moll, Armanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992; Schensul, 2010).

Scholarship that emerges from university-community partnerships has the potential to be a democratic endeavor that draws on shared resources and common goals to address social,

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civic and ethical problems (Cuthill, 2010). However, developing this kind of research partnership often raises some issues for both partners. Logistically, university researchers do not always receive recognition for their collaborative community-based work through the traditional tenure system (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Eccles, 1996; Savan, Flicker, Kolenda, & Mildenberger, 2009) and may not themselves understand fully the potential benefits of community collaboration (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Similarly, community partners may be unable to initially demonstrate the value of investing in university partnerships or may find them misaligned with their organization's expectations or responsibilities. Like university partners, community partners may not recognize the potential relevance or use of university research in addressing local issues because, historically, universities have not engaged effectively with communities—hence the well-entrenched image of the isolated and arrogant "ivory tower" in the popular imagination (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Community partners may have different expectations or uses for research results than the university's scholarship and teaching aims (Ledoux & McHenry, 2008).

Even once established, university-community partnerships may face ongoing challenges in supporting a research agenda. University researchers may or may not recognize the value of community-based knowledge and therefore see their community partners as *objects* of research rather than partners in the process (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Community partners may experience research fatigue as universities return continuously with new projects rather than sustaining a long-term commitment to change, a tendency that stems in part from funders' focus on supporting new projects rather than sustaining ongoing work (Muirhead & Woolcock, 2008). Partnerships may struggle with maintaining funding for long-term projects, and universities may have difficulty being flexible enough, due to funding and publication demands, to fit community partners' long-term visions (West & Peterson, 2009).

On the other hand, the potential benefits of research and other related activities within effective university-community partnerships are numerous (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Ebata, 1996; McNall, Reed, Brown, & Allen, 2009). Such benefits include cutting-edge knowledge production that addresses community-defined issues and better informs community practice; new opportunities for student learning and real world engagement; research training for both community members and students, as well as increased access to teaching and research opportunities for faculty; additional funding for community-based initiatives; more productive ties between universities and the local community; and greater university attention to advocacy efforts. Generally, as Muirhead and Woolcock (2008) argue,

> Universities and communities have the resources and capacity to co-produce and co-create powerful strategies for firstly, solving global problems manifested in the local community and secondly, helping both to become national and global leaders, which includes defining their identity, building a foundation for teaching and research, delivering social and economic benefits, and also providing social, cultural and physical capital and infrastructure. (pp. 8-9)

The very term "partnership" assumes a well-established, long-term relationship, but that is not always the case (Netshandama, 2010). Partnerships must be deliberate and reflective in developing trust and effective leadership that can navigate the historical power differences inscribed by the social locations of each partner organization. Partnerships must

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strive for "genuine reciprocity" in which both universities and communities guard against any apparent inequality of power between them. This challenge is compounded when community partners serve historically marginalized peoples or are themselves working at the margins of society (McNall et al., 2009; Northmore & Hart, 2011, p. 5). It is incumbent on both partners, in that case, to build leadership capacity, respect for different ways of knowing, mutual co-learning, and recognition of the multiple values held by all partners (Garlick & Palmer, 2008; Northmore & Hart, 2011). Such efforts benefit all stakeholders, allow for effective evaluation and feedback, and encourage "boundary spanners" who can act as brokers and interpreters when necessary to ensure that deeper mutual understanding can be reached (Northmore & Hart, 2011, p. 9).

Participatory Action Research Paradigms

Many of the best practices and dispositions needed to develop balanced, equitable university-community partnerships run counter to the methods and beliefs that underlie traditional positivist scholarship that distances the researcher from the researched in the service of objectivity and that values most the knowledge generated by those possessing appropriate academic credentials. Participatory action research (PAR) methodologies, however, offer alternative models for working with communities and hold promise as a tool for supporting equitable and mutually-beneficial partnerships. Growing out of critical feminist epistemologies, PAR requires deliberate scaffolding for equal partnerships between collaborators, including regular and honest communication; the sharing of responsibilities; organic, community-driven research questions; shared results; and the application of results for the benefit of all partners. In other words, PAR is not traditional academic research for the sake of increasing knowledge alone. Instead it focuses on solving real-world problems in true partnership with communities, recognizing both community and university expertise and co-creating new knowledge (Schensul, Berg & Williamson 2008).

PAR paradigms emerged as researchers began to rethink their relationships with community members and to understand research as potentially marginalizing and oppressive, particularly for communities who have faced historical discrimination and/or who have been ignored (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). At the same time, researchers from new constituencies were becoming part of the academy. They pushed for a radically different way of understanding the process and outcomes of research (Reinharz, 1992). Because of this, PAR is based on an understanding that the research team can be expanded to include non-academic researchers, that the development of research questions, data collection, analysis, and dissemination can be shared with all actors (researcher and participant), and that the outcomes of research can serve both the academic community and local populations (Cuthill, 2010; Ochocka, Moorlag & Janzen, 2010; Schensul, Berg & Williamson, 2008; West & Peterson, 2009).

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) shares the basic research tenets of PAR, but focuses more on individual student development and on broader issues of social justice for youth. (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kirshner, 2010). Participants learn critical inquiry skills through work on authentic projects that seek to address injustices found in youths' own lives and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Kirshner, 2010). YPAR moves adolescents into the position of community partners and researchers in their own right, validating their experiences and ideas, guiding and then trusting their ability to develop a sophisticated and evidence-based interpretation of their own lives (Cammarota

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& Fine, 2008; Fine, 2009). Adolescents are frequently the receivers of adult knowledge, especially in schools, and are rarely authorized to determine the scope or nature of such programming. As a recipient of services instead of an agent on their own behalf, they are the most powerless in the service dynamic. In spite of this, they are arguably best positioned to serve as constructors and shapers of knowledge about the ways that structural inequalities influence their lives. YPAR seeks to develop their voices as a means of challenging oppressions and working towards social justice for themselves and their communities.

In designing our YPAR project, we built on other models working with underserved youth and issues of inequities. Most important was Fine et al. (2004), *Echoes of Brown*, which took multimodal YPAR approaches to the racial and class-related l*egacy of Brown vs. the Board of Education*. This project combined interviews with elders who had worked for civil rights since the 1940s with contemporary students' own experiences of discrimination in their New York City high schools in order to understand "the long shadow of Brown" (p. 5) and think through issues of racial justice in schools throughout the United States. They sought to create public scholarship on the "achievement" gap that would reach the ears of those "adults who refused to listen to young people's complex renderings of Brown's victories and continuing struggles" (p. 6). Although different in scope and style, our project shared a similar concern with educational equity and focused on the dilemmas of college access and success.

An Educational Crisis in College Access and Success

Elon University, a private mid-sized liberal arts university in Alamance County, North Carolina, has engaged in a university-community partnership, the Elon Academy, for the past six years. This partnership began as a university-initiated response to the national and local educational crises that are all too familiar; it continues to attempt to redress these issues one student at a time.

National Context: Educational Inequities

According to statistical data, the United States is facing a crisis in education. Reports from the College Board, the Lumina Foundation, the Education Trust, the National College Access Network, and other sources have provided immense amounts of quantitative information about who goes to college and who does not, as well as who actually completes a college degree once matriculated. These statistics paint an alarming picture regarding both access and success for traditionally underrepresented groups. Students of color, of limited-income, and from families with little or no college-going background are most often denied the greater opportunities for economic and personal success that accrue with postsecondary education.

Low college-going rates for underrepresented students are not the result of a lack of aspirations. The National College Access Campaign found, for example, "that more than 90 percent of low-income students aged 14-16 plan to earn a college degree. Those aspirations plummet by the time those students reach college-going age. More often than not, their once-high expectations vanish" (Pulley, 2006, p. 9). Pulley (2006) argues that the cost of attending college, the level of academic preparation required to succeed in college, and the cultural capital—including information about the college-going process and understanding of norms of college behavior—serve as significant barriers to many limited income students. Clearly aspirations alone do not ensure college enrollment (St.

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John, 2003). This is true even when limited-income students' academic performance is comparable to their more affluent peers (Gerwertz, 2007).

Admission to institutions of higher education is the first step, but this represents only part of the story. For many underrepresented college students, the social, cultural and financial challenges that impede access to college do not vanish upon matriculation, and the journey to degree completion is a difficult one. As a result, although graduation rates have improved in the last five years, significant disparities continue to exist. In the population between the ages of 25 and 29, 10.4% of Latinos and 16.4% of African Americans have completed a four-year degree. In the same age range, 24.5% of Whites have completed a four-year degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Limited-income high school graduates attain bachelor's degrees at a rate of 22% while their middle-income peers do so at a rate of 55% (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). When family income is under $25,000, young people have less than a 6% chance of earning a four-year college degree (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Three-fourths of high scoring upper-income students complete four-year degrees while their equally high scoring limited-income peers complete degrees at a rate of 36% (Carnegie Results, 2003). These statistics reflect the findings of the ECMC Foundation (2009) that "access to higher education alone is not enough to provide educational opportunity to all when low-income, first-generation college-going students are the least likely to graduate" (p. 1). When combining factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and income, the statistics tell an even more complex story. Only 4% of limited-income black males, for example, earn a bachelor's degree by their mid-20s (Carey, 2008).

Local Context: The Opportunity Gap in Alamance County

Alamance County has a population of just over 153,000. According to the 2012 *State of the County Health Report*, 76.2% of the population is White, 19.2% is African American, and 11.4% is Hispanic/Latino. Public school demographics, however, identify 42% of students as students of color. The Latino/a community has grown especially rapidly, and many children enter the schools with Spanish as their primary home language. In 1997-1998, 4.1% of the student population was Latino/a. By 2010-2011, that number had risen to 21%.

Once thriving on textiles and manufacturing, the county now offers few jobs for those without higher education. In 2011, the unemployment rate in the county was 10.7%. As a result, the poverty rate has risen steadily. According to the *Health Report* (2012), 16.3% of the population in the county is now living below the poverty level, 29% of children are living in poverty, 25.7% of people are without health insurance, and over 11,000 households (17% of all households) receive food stamps. Over half of all students in the public schools receive free and reduced lunch (a key indicator of economic status) while thirteen years ago only 34% qualified for this service.

Schools in Alamance County are facing tremendous financial challenges, as well. Due to current and projected revenue shortfalls, the system was required to return more than $5,000,000 to the state over a period of three years. The salary supplement for teachers in Alamance County cannot compete with surrounding counties. Data provided by the state's Department of Public Instruction (2012) indicates that by traveling just a few extra miles over the county line a teacher can earn up to $3,000 additional dollars per year and a principal can earn as much as $18,000 more per year. This salary gap makes it extremely difficult to retain experienced staff and develop and sustain important long-term reform initiatives.

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Major cutbacks along with a lack of resources and incentives for public school personnel have resulted in the Alamance County schools being under-resourced in multiple ways, including an insufficient number of school counselors. The nationally recommended ratio of school counselors to students in middle and high school is 1:250 or fewer, but the state average ratio in 2007 was 1:320. In Alamance County middle and high schools, the rate was even higher at 1:474 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007). Students who do not have family members with a history of college-going rely heavily on school counselors as their primary source for college information and support. Thousands of Alamance County students fall into this category since only 21.4% of the residents of Alamance County aged 25 and older possess a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These students frequently lack the cultural capital possessed by middle- and upper-income peers that results in access to and success in college (Bloom, 2008), such as familiarity with college vocabulary ("GPA," "liberal arts," "major," etc.) and social networks that provide knowledge of careers and role models in professional positions. Students whose parents attended college are more knowledgeable about resources such as scholarships, financial aid, and grants, as well as the process of visiting a wide variety of colleges to find a college match. According to Bloom (2008), "College going capital . . . is deeply rooted in a series of personal experiences over long periods of time" (p. 4) and programs hoping to equalize the playing field need to be cognizant of the profound differences between low- and high-income students, striving to replicate the resources and "enabling conditions" (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 325), not within students, but within and through institutions (such as college campuses).

University Context: A Wake-Up Call for Elon University

In data collected from 2004-2006, North Carolina ranked sixth highest in the country in the number of "dropout factories"—high schools that graduate 60% or fewer students who entered the school as freshmen. One third of the public high schools in Alamance County were given this designation (Associated Press, 2007). In 2006, Central High School (a pseudonym) was threatened with closure by a superior court judge due to repeated low performance on standardized measures of success. Even after being re-constituted under new leadership in the wake of this judgment, Central High faced, and continues to face, many challenges. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch grew from 34% to 75%. Low numbers of AP classes provided little opportunity for students wanting an academic challenge. Between 2007 and 2010, no AP classes were taught at all, requiring students to travel to another school or attempt online classes with no face-to-face instructor. Reduced funding eliminated bus services, making it impossible for students without personal transportation to take advantage of offerings at other schools, and many limited-income families had little access to technology at home, making online courses an exercise in frustration. The average publication year of the books in Central's library in 2006 was 1989. Clearly, students at Central High lacked the same resources and opportunities as their peers at more well-resourced schools.

The judge's threat to close Central High was a serious condemnation of the situation at the school and also a "wake up" call for Elon University and its president. President Leo Lambert began rethinking the role of the university in its local community. How could Elon, a thriving institution with significant resources, reconcile its place in a community where less than seven miles away a high school struggled not only to meet the needs of its students, but even to survive? The university had a long history of community involvement

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and civic engagement and the time seemed right to develop a new partnership which addressed the dire needs of the schools.

Lambert turned to his university colleagues with this challenge. Several small partnerships emerged, including a volunteer tutoring program for Central High. An external grant allowed nearly 200 students from Central High to tour Elon's campus, participate in college classes, experience the dining hall, and attend a "Pathways to College" session. Faculty in the Schools of Education and Communications teamed to produce *Go-4-College,* a DVD based on questions frequently asked by students and families. The DVD is regularly distributed at college access programs hosted by the school system and is freely available online.

The most extensive partnership between Elon and the local school community, however, was Elon Academy. This program capitalized on the potential for a postsecondary institution to address the issue of unequal access to college by developing an intensive college access and success program for Alamance County high school students.

Program Context: Elon Academy

In 2006, shortly after the near-closure of Central High, Elon's president invited a senior professor from the School of Education (Deborah) to serve a two-year term as Faculty Administrative Fellow and Assistant to the President. In this role, she established a team to research, design, and implement a college access program for local high school students. University faculty (some with recent teaching experience in the local schools), admissions personnel, public school personnel, parents, religious leaders, and a recent Central High graduate were consulted throughout the development process and many continue to be involved. Additionally, high school personnel from each of the seven high schools (six traditional public, one public charter) volunteer or are appointed to serve as a primary liaison between Elon Academy and the school. These "Advocates" are typically assistant principals, counselors, or master teachers, and the Academy relies on them for many partnership activities, including facilitating positive working relations in general between the university-housed program and the schools. Experienced teachers from the schools serve as faculty alongside university professors in both the summer and year-round program, and are joined by master teachers from other nearby communities, bringing additional perspectives to the work. This faculty team has been central in shaping program goals and academic direction over the years.

Elon Academy's mission is to support students—called "scholars" by the program—who are underrepresented on college and university campuses as they pursue higher education, build leadership skills, and develop an active sense of social responsibility. Elon Academy provides the support and resources needed to ensure that its graduates obtain college degrees, take advantage of the rich experiences of college, and contribute to the intellectual and social climate of the university (and ultimately their communities) through their active campus/community citizenship. In order to achieve this mission, Elon Academy has developed over the last seven years into a four-phase program including 1) a college access program for high school students, 2) a transitions to college program for high school graduates, 3) a college success program for college students, and 4) an alumni program. The program is provided at no cost to scholars; however they must demonstrate cognitive, social, and personal growth to remain in the Academy. The Academy is not a high school; scholars continue in their public schools and attend Elon Academy programming during the summer and once a month on Saturdays during the regular school year (with optional

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additional programming at various times). In this way, the public schools remain the most important partner in these students' development.

Students are recruited during their 9th grade year and remain part of the program until college graduation. In the summer of 2007, Elon Academy accepted its first cohort of 26 scholars. Each year, a new cohort of 22-29 ninth graders is selected. Currently, the Academy serves 130 scholars (62 in college and 68 in high school) and over 350 family members. More than 80% of scholars complete the high school program. Of those, 100% have been accepted into college and 98% are still enrolled. Graduates of the first cohort are in their third year in college and expected to graduate in May 2014 from a variety of 4-year colleges. Thirty-two percent of students are African-American, 30% are Latino/a, 27% are White, 9% are multi-racial, and 2% are Native American or Asian.

This article is positioned within the college access program (the first three years). This phase combines a month-long residential experience on Elon's campus during three successive summers prior to the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades with follow-up experiences during the academic year. During this time, Elon Academy provides students with access to admissions pathways, college planning information and assistance, campus visits to a variety of schools, academic and co-curricular activities, and university resources that encourage them to discover their passions, challenge themselves, and imagine potential college futures. All of these experiences and the accompanying relationships with staff, university students (mentors), and community members are essential to building the cultural capital necessary to ensure both access and success. Since its inception, Elon Academy has evolved into a complex support network for students and families and continues to expand and refine its programming with regular, ongoing feedback from scholars, families, staff, community stakeholders, and university students.

YPAR at Elon Academy

In 2010, Elon Academy employed an anthropologist (Mary Alice) to craft a study to provide insights into the local community struggles around college access and offer a special opportunity for the scholars in the program to learn social science research methods. That fall, 27 scholars met with Academy staff, the research associate and an undergraduate student assistant,[1] to begin a study of the lived college access challenges of students of color, those with limited-income, and those who will be first-generation students.

The team (including the 15 scholars who decided to continue with the project after learning the expectations) participated in three project stages:[2] a series of ten workshops during Fall 2010, data collection and analysis during Spring 2011, and reporting of results to community stakeholders during Summer 2011.[3] The workshops began with learning about qualitative research and research ethics. Scholars, research associate, and undergraduate assistant then read professional literature on college access and developed a set of research questions collaboratively: How does a student's social location(s) influence

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[1] Later in the project, two additional undergraduate students joined the team.

[2] At the same time, the university team supporting the project (including Mary Alice, Kim, and Deborah) began gathering meta-research data about the impact of the project itself, focusing on the potential for change in students' perceptions of social location, diversity, research, and their own worlds. This data came primarily through a series of interviews at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the project with each scholar-researcher.

[3] The project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Elon University. We recognized from the beginning that the project would need to be modified several times during the course of the research due to the collaborative nature of it. We communicated frequently with the IRB to receive additional approval when changes were necessary.

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college access? Do the challenges and obstacles students face in working towards access to college create opportunities for entering and being successful in college? The remaining workshops focused on qualitative data collection methods including interviewing, focus group facilitation, participant observation and photovoice (a photographic method that invites participants to critically interpret images of their lives).

During the second phase of the project, scholar-researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with other scholars, wrote field notes and took photos that captured their own experiences with college access. This part of the process was difficult for the scholars because other Elon Academy scholars did not participate in the numbers we had hoped, and research team scholars struggled to juggle school work, responsibilities at home, and data collection. Initial data analysis, using a grounded theory approach and AtlasTI software, took place over the students' spring break.

The third phase included an intensive summer research institute prior to the regular summer program and a special manuscript writing class during the summer program.[4] During the institute, the scholars examined other YPAR projects (particularly focusing on Fine et al.'s *Echoes of Brown* project), read additional scholarly literature to support further data analysis and interpretation, and developed a plan for the organization of their book. During the four-week summer program, the scholars met four days a week to write their book chapters. Two faculty (one English education (Kim), one anthropology (Mary Alice)), and three undergraduate research assistants with extensive writing and tutoring experience assisted with the writing class.

The scholar-researchers created a book-length manuscript that captured the messages they most wanted to share with a broader audience. The book was a natural outgrowth of the scholar-researchers' developing sense of research as a socially reconstructive project. Early interviews with participants (conducted by faculty and undergraduate assistants) solicited scholars' reasons for participating. Most believed that the project would allow them to continue developing their skills for college and, more importantly, add a powerful line to their academic resumes. For instance, Katie[5] saw the project as giving her an edge: "I wanna get into selective schools so I wanna do anything that I can to [stand out] a little bit." Most scholar-researchers shared this motivation.

Interviews conducted midway through the project, however, found a different sensibility. Paige expressed a desire to see and use the results to change people's thinking about underrepresented students. "I'm really fascinated with what sort of results we're gonna find, and I'm really looking forward to people's reactions once we're done with it and what they think about it …I'm hoping that they'll actually notice that opportunities aren't equal for all races…and that we'll sort of knock their stereotypes." Scholar-researchers never forgot the work might look good to college recruiters, but their central reason for seeing the project through was advocacy, not only personal success.

Scholar-researchers increasingly wished to use their emerging expertise and their relationships with Elon, Elon Academy, and the research team to encourage the college dreams of other students like them. They felt they had something critical to say to the community and to higher education. The team self-published their work through CreateSpace, a division of Amazon.com, under a title they felt best exemplified their

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[4] At this point in the project, two of the 15 scholar-researchers decided to leave the project due to family illness and desire to participate in other classes during the summer program.

[5] All names of scholar-researchers are pseudonyms.

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ultimate goal: *Speaking Out: Underrepresented Students Challenging the Inequities of College Access.* The book launched in November 2011 with a book-signing, a photovoice gallery in Elon's performing arts center, and an invited keynote speaker (Julio Cammarota, ground-breaking YPAR researcher) whose public address raised yet another call on behalf of underrepresented students. The chapters address issues such as the challenges faced by first-generation, minority, undocumented and low-income students; family issues; and challenges in the schools (tracking, school counselors, teacher motivation, and high school preparation). The voices of the authors have continued to engage the university and the community in critical conversations about educational inequities.

The research team functioned as "boundary spanners," crossing the divisions between Elon University, the surrounding public schools, and the Alamance County community. The team spanned age (from 16 to 60), social location (from community to university), access to wealth (from poverty to comparative affluence), and credentials of power and knowledge (from pre-driver's license to post-doctorate). They shared a desire to understand the plight of underrepresented students in Alamance County on the problematic journey toward higher education. The high school student participants, in particular, lived at the intersections of these issues and were therefore uniquely positioned to seek and share knowledge across all such boundaries, as well as add their own often-unheard perspectives to the national conversation on college access.

Lessons Learned

As a tool for enriching a college access partnership, the YPAR project provided some important benefits, but also revealed some of the difficulties that such partnerships can face. Some of these are familiar from the literature on university-community partnerships and on the nature of research across university/community divides. Other challenges are endemic to research with youth or to participatory research paradigms themselves. Some, no doubt, are unique to this particular context.

Challenges Specific to the YPAR Project

Logistical challenges may interfere in the design and function of YPAR projects, especially those related to time availability for all partners, adult and youth.

Many collaborative community-based projects wrestle with locating adequate financial support. As a non-profit, Elon Academy is funded through gifts and grants, and raising funds for basic programming is ongoing work. Hiring an additional part-time staff member and funding a special elective project required piecing together multiple small grants and assistance from a private donor who valued social research even in an era where basic science, military, and commercial research draws the most support.

Even with funding, a long-term research project requires substantial time commitment from all partners. For university faculty, this must fit into an already rigorous schedule of teaching, scholarship, and service. Pre-tenure faculty on our project worried about the risks associated with a project that might not produce scholarly texts recognizable by a promotions board. Self-published manuscripts, for example, carry comparatively little weight as evidence of scholarly ability, and yet they demand significant hours devoted not only to crafting text, but also to designing layout and meeting technical print-ready standards. Similarly, supporting pre-college adolescent researchers may be less valuable in a university context than growing undergraduates or developing a more "professional"

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scholarly agenda.

More importantly, the scholar-researchers also struggled with limited time. As college-bound students, they took rigorous high school courses, including Honors and Advanced Placement, with heavy reading and writing workloads. Elon Academy pushes all scholars to be active at their schools, not merely within the program, so most were busy with athletic teams, dramatic productions, club leadership positions, and other important school-related experiences. Many had additional responsibilities at home in caring for younger siblings, doing house chores and yard work, and/or working external jobs to earn money (for self, college, or family). Some were coping with other stresses—from racial stereotyping to the bitter worries of being undocumented or having family members at risk of deportation. Some had concerns about obtaining basic resources like food and hot water.

Because of the intensity of YPAR, it also ran the risk of undermining scholars' overall success by luring them away from more mundane schoolwork or simply by over-crowding their lives. Katie explained, "I had too much going on, and I never came to Elon Academy this much before during the school year . . . And, umm, it was a lot of time, especially driving 20 minutes away from my house." For all that they gained, something less tangible but no less important was lost. For Katie, that was simple relaxation and rejuvenation. For others it was time spent with family, better focus on school, and maintaining social relationships.

Critique, a natural outgrowth of YPAR's social justice lens, can have repercussions for the more vulnerable members of the project. Even if it does not, it may generate concern and fear.

Through the YPAR process, scholar-researchers learned to take a more critical view of the world around them. During the data analysis phase, Kelsey grappled with the patterns revealed in her research: "Maybe some people don't really know why some people don't go to college. They just [think] they don't want to go to college. Maybe some people… they probably don't have the money. They don't have the resources. They don't know much about college. And so it is something to show others that I found out in my research that people cannot go to college or think that they cannot go to college because of these circumstances." Kelsey recognized that "people" believe poor students simply don't "want" college futures. Even more insidiously, poverty itself can create a tacit belief that college is inaccessible for poor students, who then "think that they cannot go to college" in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Kelsey often talked about the challenges facing undocumented students, students who speak English as a second language, and students who do not have support from their families to continue their educations. As the project continued, she spoke about a growing wish to expose these kinds of structural issues and challenge people to recognize that not all students have the same opportunities to attend college, whether imposed from without or within. She began to see and explicitly name racism, discrimination, and injustice where she had not seen it before.

When scholar-researchers first began using language such as "structural inequalities," "underrepresented students," and "ineffective policies," the faculty leaders were impressed and heartened by their sophisticated thinking. However, for these students, such words were not merely ideological or an efficient way of naming problems; they were describing their lives and dreams. At times, this realization felt positive. In an interview conducted near the end of the project, Raven said, "It's kinda like a voice of all of us a little bit because

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we were all able to contribute to [the chapter about first generation students] specifically because we're all first generation students. And, it just - like when all the statistics went around, it helped us realize like, we're not alone and it happens to a lot of people. So it kinda helped." But new awareness about the hidden structures that shape their lives were also moments of pain. Faith captured this feeling poignantly in her explanation of a photo she took of an African American toddler reaching for a soap bubble. "[She's] about to catch, get the bubble or whatever. I was like, 'Oh, wow. She wants the bubble. But little does she know when she touches it, it's going to pop.' Like it just shows how fragile your future is." Initially, her photo represented the need to start preparing for college at a very early age, but she later reflected that college hopes often prove elusive to many underrepresented students. She felt, even for herself, that it was perhaps "too late." This kind of realization feels discouraging, overwhelming, exhausting, and impossible. Some scholar-researchers even worried that they had betrayed their schools and communities in taking such a critical stance, imagining blame and responsibility. Others felt betrayed themselves, neglected by those who were supposed to outfit them for success. Some felt that their dreams of a college education might not come true after all.

This is the turning point in a YPAR project, the moment when possibilities for positive social change can emerge and when facilitators have the opportunity to help channel discouragement and frustration towards action. Facilitators, in fact, have an obligation to work diligently to support and amplify co-researchers' voices so that those in more powerful positions hear their arguments[6] (Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004). But such opportunities must be created by the facilitators—and may carry their own risks, especially when research results are directly or indirectly critical of the very authorities who can serve as the best audience. This is especially complex when student researchers/writers must balance critique with the realities and constraints that under-resourced schools and communities (themselves vulnerable stakeholders) face.

Finding and navigating an appropriate audience, however, does not replace the need to counsel students through the vulnerabilities that emerge alongside new critical understandings of the world. For this project, the ongoing emotional battle was mediated in part by the relationships scholar-researchers developed with staff (both prior to the project and during) and with the undergradute assistants who served as mentors. These undergraduates were themselves first generation college students from lower-socioeconomic homes; two were students of color, including one from an international background. They represented success stories amidst the structural barriers and helped scholars cope with their emotions.

Locating appropriate venues to share results of YPAR can be challenging.

Finding venues for youth voices is challenging, especially in a world where "research" indicates objective scholarship of high writing skill. Underrepresented students are often denied advanced classes and disproportionately tracked into lower-level courses where they develop minimal writing skills. The undergraduate research assistants, two of whom

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[6] In the case of the *Speaking Out* project, students' voices were not only heard but were acted upon in a way that would have been impossible without the partnership between the university and the local community. Students shared their research locally with the School Board, the Elon University Board of Visitors, and the general Elon community at the book's launch, as well as accepted presentations at local and national conferences (including the Society for Applied Anthropology where scholars conducted a well-received poster session).

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were hired primarily for writing support, struggled to help scholars craft arguments that projected a scholarly voice that would be recognized as valid to academic and professional audiences. The challenge was to maintain the authentic voice of the students while also supporting subtle shifts in voice towards more scholarly representation. The scholars asked for feedback and wanted their work to "sound good," but it was often a struggle not to edit out the scholar voices in the process. In retrospect, both scholars and facilitators agreed that additional time to write and more explicit writing workshops earlier in the project would have been helpful.

The facilitators felt that the students needed to be able to hold the product of their research in their hands quickly and be able to share with others what they had been working so hard on for the past year. Scholarly articles and books often take a year or more to emerge in print and to produce such a product would have required more editing and revisions than was possible given financial and time limitations. The compromise was to self-publish the book through Amazon—leading to a very fast turn-around and the ability to hold a book signing event in the fall just after the scholars completed the project. However, self-publishing also meant that we were largely responsible for dissemination of the work without the help of a publisher. Had this challenge been anticipated at the beginning of the project different types of short-term products would have been considered.

Positive Outcomes of the YPAR Project

YPAR projects can invite advocacy for real community needs.

Scholar-researchers determined their book's initial audience, carrying copies into the schools to share with other students and with those they felt could serve as advocates for them. All school counselors received copies, as did Alamance County Board of Education members (who officially recognized and publicly congratulated the scholars on their work). The team distributed books to each high school's principal and library. One principal sought out a scholar-researcher to tell her that the book inspired her to make some changes at the school. An administrator at Alamance County School System's central office said to Elon Academy staff, "I couldn't put the book down—I read it in one sitting." Many months later, the team continues to distribute the book through Amazon and to receive responses from a variety of educational professionals.

Elon University's Board of Visitors also invited the scholar-researchers to discuss their findings at a board meeting. For many of the authors, that meeting was the first time they felt that influential adults outside of the school system listened to what they had to say about issues that mattered to them. The Board of Visitors recommitted to supporting Elon Academy through fundraising efforts. In a similar move, the Elon University Board of Trustees established a discretionary fund for Academy scholars facing emergency situations in order to ensure that unexpected circumstances do not derail students on the path to and through college.

Beyond the walls of Elon University, the research team, including scholar-researchers, have shared findings with other college access programs, foundations, and professional organizations at annual meetings. Not only are people more aware of unequal access to higher education, many are moved to provide financial and other resources to students in these circumstances. The YPAR project, with its compelling mixture of research and personal testimony, provides tangible evidence that students who are often not expected to

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succeed can flourish and thrive when they have opportunities and resources.

YPAR projects can provide data that contributes to the long-term success of the partnership itself.

The YPAR project's focus on individualized support and student-led advocacy inspired and informed many recent program decisions. Elon Academy now employs undergraduate mentors in order for all scholars to benefit from increased individual support. Bloom (2008) argues that undergraduate mentors—as "near-peers" only slightly older than their mentees—can play "an invaluable role in widening first-generation students' social networks, and offering them a range of visions of what they are aspiring to" (p. 6). Inspired by the undergraduate research assistants' invaluable role in the YPAR project, Elon Academy works with a team of ten university students who mentor high school sophomores, juniors and seniors in the program. Mentors guide scholars in their efforts to achieve academic excellence and prepare for college, serving as role models and, in many cases, helping scholars deal with both social and academic issues. The YPAR project, with its clearer portrait of the community's needs, reinforced the need for a comprehensive college access program to individually address academic and social challenges in a way that Elon Academy had not done previously.

The enthusiasm shown by YPAR scholar-researchers to share their knowledge and inspire others to pursue a college education led to opportunities for more of the scholars to mentor their own "near peers" through the Elon Academy Ambassadors Program. Working in a new community partnership with elementary and middle schools in Alamance County, this initiative promotes college access awareness with the youngest community stakeholders. Academy scholars, with staff guidance, plan and implement activities that share their college knowledge and hopefully inspire the younger students to consider college a possibility. Just as with the YPAR project, this work has been meaningful, empowering, and embedded in both the community and the university. Many of Elon Academy's shyest students have blossomed in this community leadership role. They began to solidify their college-going commitments as they became role models for others. They learned leadership, collaboration and presentation skills, and recognized that their voices can make a difference in their communities.

Conclusion

Elon University, like many other colleges and universities, can make dramatic inroads in addressing inequities by embracing its neighbors and co-creating opportunities for young people. Partnerships can include sharing physical facilities (housing, classrooms, computer labs, etc.), expertise (in engaged learning, leadership, service learning, research, community-based skills and insights) and human resources (faculty, staff, student mentors/ teaching assistants/tutors, community leaders). Tackling entrenched and complex issues like the unlevel playing field of higher education will take all parts of a community (especially higher education institutions). Elon Academy is an extension of Elon's commitment to community partnership and mutual advancement, but the YPAR project reported upon here extended this work in meaningful ways. Speaking directly through the immediate and personal voices of marginalized young people, it raised awareness of the challenges facing students well beyond the members of Elon Academy and, at the same time, demonstrated that with the proper support, limited-income, first-generation, and/or minority students

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can succeed. This is a goal all educational stakeholders can and should share—equitable, successful access to education at all levels.

The university-based researchers in this partnership are also building scholarship, including this article, which we hope will be recognized as valuable by tenure committees and the academic community. Participatory research methodologies blur the boundaries between scholarship and advocacy, reconfiguring traditional research dynamics in terms of knowledge production, dissemination, and utilization. While certainly not easy, the movement between scholarship and action can be productive, especially in repairing the socio-historical inequities that plague schools and communities. Participatory research projects allow university and community members, including the students who live such complex lives, to speak to each other and co-create knowledge that points toward better programs and, ultimately, a more equitable world.

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Acknowledgement

Appendix

Elon Academy: Staff

Elon Academy staff includes the Director, the Associate Director, the Assistant Director of Scholar Support, the Assistant Director of Academic Programs (part-time), the Assistant Director of Counseling and Family Programs (part-time) and a Program Assistant. The staff operates on a youth development model, building on the strengths our scholars

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and families bring to the program. They hold a foundational belief that with appropriate and comprehensive services, opportunities, and supports there is a college or university at which every talented young person can be successful regardless of financial status or family history of college attendance.

Elon Academy: Recruitment

Students for Elon Academy are recruited during their 9th grade year. Each fall, meetings are arranged with public school personnel to update them on the mission, goals, objectives, and selection criteria for the Academy. Each high school identifies or re-confirms their Advocate, an administrator, counselor, or teacher who works closely with the Elon Academy staff to disseminate information about the Academy and facilitate recruitment of potential students. Advocates, along with all high school personnel and community members, are encouraged to nominate students, but many applicants discover the program for the first time through recruitment mailings. All ninth graders in Alamance County Schools receive a flyer describing the program and an invitation to request an application via postage-paid postcard. Advocates, staff, and current students and families in the program work together to organize information sessions, one at each high school and one, presented in Spanish, at a Latino/a community center. These sessions serve to address student and family questions or concerns with sending their child away to Elon University for four weeks in the summer or about the long-term commitment of the program.

Once a student has applied, the school provides student transcripts and references. Eligible students are invited for an interview. In order to meet eligibility requirements, students must demonstrate financial need and/or have no family history of four-year college attendance, be in good academic standing at their school (at least a 2.5 GPA), have no pattern of disciplinary issues, and be willing to commit to program expectations. Accepted students and their families sign a three-year commitment to fully participate in the college access programming offered through the Academy. Each entering cohort ideally includes representation from all high schools, and a roughly even mix of racial identities (one-third African American, one-third Latino/a, one-third White). Recruitment of males is an ongoing challenge and reflects larger societal trends on schooling success.

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