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# Celebrating C3's Creativity: Stakeholder Engagement in Evaluation of the Chicago Conservation Corps

Kristen A. Pratt

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## Abstract

The Chicago Conservation Corps (C3) recruits, trains, and supports a network of volunteers interested in leading sustainable community-based service projects. This project served as a developmental evaluation of the program, utilizing community-based participatory action research as a methodology. Collaboratively, C3 volunteers, partners, and staff decided to conduct a participatory media project, collecting feedback from a wide range of program stakeholders to address the question of C3's greatest successes and areas for improvement. More than 100 stakeholders submitted feedback through videos, photos, stories, poems, and other creative outlets. Several co-researchers were then engaged in analyzing these submissions to find themes and stories that have since guided the implementation of the program. This study found that C3 successfully builds diverse, expansive networks and educates people regarding pro-environmental behaviors, empowering people to build and maintain sustainable communities. It also serves as an example of community engagement in program evaluation.

## Introduction

The mission of the Chicago Conservation Corps (C3) is to recruit, train, and support volunteers as they lead environmental service projects in their communities (<https://www.volunteermatch.org/search/org201584.jsp>). Since the program's inception in 2006, a vast network has formed, bringing together Chicago residents with a passion for environmental issues, teachers and students from Chicago Public Schools, city agencies (e.g., the Chicago Departments of Transportation, Streets and Sanitation, and Water Management), more than a dozen official partners representing the environmental non-profit field in Chicago, and innumerable community-based organizations engaged by the program's volunteers. Collectively, this group has implemented hundreds of community-based projects that have not only positively impacted the quality of life in their neighborhoods, but have also addressed varied environmental issues including air quality; energy conservation; water quality and conservation; waste reduction, reuse, and appropriate management; food access and quality; climate change mitigation and adaptation; and a myriad of other topics.

## Research Context

When this study was conducted in 2012, C3 was a program of the City of Chicago. In May 2011, Rahm Emanuel started his term as Chicago's first new mayor in more than 20 years. Combined

with the city's budgetary crisis, this change in administration led to significant changes across the city, including the dissolution of the Chicago Department of Environment (in which C3 was originally housed). At the time of this study, C3 was temporarily being administered through the Chicago Department of Transportation while a request for proposals went out to determine which local non-profit organization would take over stewardship of the program on July 1, 2012. The city was offering three years of funding (2012–2015) to help the program get on its feet in its new home. Uncertainty about C3's future administration and structure called for a multi-stakeholder developmental evaluation of the program. The evaluation provided an opportunity to reflect on the program to date and to consider values and vision for the future. This evaluation required consideration not only of straightforward performance measures, but also of less easily expressed/more qualitative elements of the program. The hope was that, by engaging C3's varied stakeholders in this evaluation, everyone would take ownership of the resultant vision and remain invested in the long-term. In other words by engaging volunteers and partners in creating a vision, C3 hoped the stakeholders would be more committed to carrying out the vision and not just leaving it in the hands of C3's future staff, who were unknown at the time of this study.

This action research project sought to engage the program's stakeholders in the primary question of: How can we improve the Chicago Conservation Corps program and continue its successes? Using this question to guide our efforts, we aimed to uncover descriptions, directions, and dreams that would lead to a clear vision of the program at that time and into the future, encompassing everyone's collective values and goals. Key sub-questions included:

1. How can different stakeholders be engaged in determining C3's successes and areas for improvement?
2. What makes C3 successful?
3. What can we do to improve the program?

### *The Stakeholders*

C3 engages a broad and diverse array of stakeholders in its projects. The program from 2006–2012 was managed by three staff members who were responsible for: recruitment of volunteers; leading trainings and other events; providing project support and troubleshooting assistance; conducting outreach; connecting partner organizations with volunteer efforts and vice versa; and liaising with high-ranking City of Chicago staff (e.g., representatives from the mayor's office) who provided "big picture" direction and oversight of the program.

As the urban environmental leaders "on the ground" making significant, positive impacts in their communities, volunteers are one of C3's most essential groups of stakeholders. Without their involvement in this program, there would be no program.

At the time of this project, we worked with more than 400 adult volunteers through our Environmental Leadership Training program. These community-based volunteers plan and implement projects in their communities based on self-identified needs and interests. "Leaders" complete 20+ hours of training and a community-based sustainability service project. Before they complete their projects, we call them "trainees."

As of 2012, we also worked with more than 100 teachers in Chicago Public Schools. These teachers led conservation clubs that focused on sustainability service in their schools and communities. It is estimated that more than 1,500 youth were engaged in these clubs annually.

C3 volunteers (e.g., leaders, trainees, and teachers) self-select for participation in our program, generally because of interest in environmental issues. However, they come to the table with varied

levels of education, skill sets, and environmental awareness. As a whole, our volunteers are also very culturally and socioeconomically diverse, and represent every one of Chicago's 50 wards.

C3's partner organizations also comprise an essential component of the programming by providing expertise and access to resources. They often serve as "green professors" at trainings or as specialized project liaisons, working directly with volunteers. They are also prominent figures in Chicago's environmental movement; their opinions and input figure in greatly to C3's reputation in this community. Representatives from these organizations are in frequent contact with C3 staff and volunteers and have expressed willingness in the past to share feedback as C3 has rolled out new projects and activities. Their contributions to this evaluation were meaningful not only because of their involvement with and understanding of C3, but because of their shared perspective with much of the local environmental community.

Eighty-seven of 475 stakeholders expressed interest in participating in this project. This group was comprised of 40 leaders, five trainees, 26 teachers, two students, eight partners, and six current and former staff members (who are also active leaders). In total, 42 people participated in at least one of the research planning meetings or events. Of these participants, 55% were leaders, 7% were trainees, 14% were teachers, 10% were partners, and 12% were current or former staff. This group of co-researchers represented the diversity of our program, including representatives from across the city with varied experiences with the program (e.g., different lengths/types of engagement, volunteers versus paid professionals).

### **Methodology**

#### *Considering Appropriate Research Methodologies*

While C3 collects feedback from volunteers regularly with regard to trainings and volunteers' individual projects, we had never collected input on the program as a whole from all of our stakeholders, focused upon a specific question (i.e., successes and areas for improvement). Therefore, there was much to be learned from existing research with regard to the identification and measurement of success and the engagement of diverse stakeholders in this type of evaluation.

The evaluator, Michael Quinn Patton, defines the goal of developmental evaluation as "guid[ing] adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments" (Patton, 2011, p. 1). Complex environments are characterized by a high

level of uncertainty and disagreement. In other words, the “correct” path is unclear and stakeholders have differing views on how to proceed. There are no rules and lots of different opinions. (Remember these conditions were certainly a part of C3’s culture at that time given the uncertainty of the program’s future.) In these situations, Patton recommends an evaluation design that is “flexible, emergent, and dynamic” (2011, p.100). It is not just “bean counting” or assessing existing variables. It is an attempt to determine a baseline understanding of the situation; guiding visions and values; initial conditions and environment within which future action will occur; and much more (Patton, 2011). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is often used as an evaluation approach for developmental evaluation, and so community-based participatory action research (CBPR) was chosen as the research method for this project (Patton, 2011).

CBPR has been defined as a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. It begins with a research topic of importance to the community and has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change. (McNall, Doberneck, & Van Egeren, 2010).

PAR principles as defined by the action research visionary, Orlando Fals Borda, aligned well with the goals of this research. We sought to “build on strengths and resources within the [C3] community” and “facilitate collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research” (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991 pp. 8–9). Most importantly, we sought to build and share knowledge about C3’s successes and areas for improvement and empower C3’s stakeholders, because we recognized that “community involvement can enhance the quality of research” (McNall et al., 2010, p. 259). Further, “when research is designed and conducted in collaboration with communities, those communities are more likely to use the findings to develop their own solutions to their problems” (McNall et al., 2010, p. 258). In other words, by engaging C3 stakeholders in this type of research, we conducted high-quality research that encouraged continued engagement in the long-term.

It is also important to note that this was not just a matter of involving community members; the level of involvement was key. “In PAR, research is not conducted on community members, youth, or other parties usually excluded from knowledge making; rather, research is conducted with community members or youth, challenging

conventional distinctions between researcher and the researched” (Smith, Rosenzweig, & Schmidt, 2010, p. 1,116). PAR methods require that the research participants (i.e., C3 staff, volunteers, and partners) be treated as co-researchers throughout the process.

While somewhat unconventional in the research world, this necessitated that the research methodology be determined collaboratively with the help of C3’s stakeholders. These co-researchers were also responsible for helping with the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. As the primary researcher, I was responsible for facilitation of this work, but was not responsible for carrying out every cycle of the research independently; in fact, that would have been quite contrary to the goals of PAR. It is especially important that the evaluator “acts as a process facilitator and creates social conditions for genuine dialogue: openness, engagement, and inclusion” (Baur, Arnold, Van Elteren, Nierse, & Abma, 2010, p. 235).

In this participatory action research project, stakeholders were engaged at every level, but given our research questions, there was a significant focus upon diverse and creative ways of collecting stakeholder feedback. Baur et al., (2010, p. 243) suggests that “storytelling is a good way for stakeholders, particularly those with more silent voices in a marginalized position, to share their experiences with others.”

Similarly, methods like photovoice, videovoice, and participatory video provoke in-depth sharing of information and creation of knowledge from a diversity of stakeholders on a diversity of subjects. “Photovoice is a participatory method not of counting up things but of drawing on the community’s active lore, observation, and stories, in terms both visual and oral” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 382). It “recognizes that...people often have an expertise and insight into their own communities and worlds that professionals and outsiders lack” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370). Not only does this method bring out great knowledge and information, it also invites participants to become potential “catalysts for change” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). It “goes beyond the conventional role of needs assessment by inviting people to become advocates for their own and their community’s well-being” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 374). Photovoice is also becoming a common methodology to address environmental issues, providing another connection to C3’s work (Powers & Freedman, 2012).

Based upon the existing literature, an assessment of C3’s successes and areas for improvement

required methods that allowed all stakeholders, including volunteers, to feel empowered; were flexible, dynamic, and emergent and used PAR methods; and offered varied opportunities for stakeholder expression.

**Data Collection Methods**

Action research is a cyclical process; each cycle is defined by a pattern of planning, acting, and reflecting, which then leads into the next cycle. The methodology for this project will be outlined under this premise and can be seen in graphic form in **Figure 1**.

**Cycle 1: The data collection method.** Four hundred seventy-five C3 leaders, teachers, and partners (all of whom were actively involved in the program) were invited to participate in a research planning meeting as a part of an evaluation/visioning process for C3. Eighty-seven of these stakeholders expressed interest in participating in the process and were considered the “research team” for this project and kept apprised of all goings on.

Sixteen attendees joined us for our first meeting, at which the purpose of this research project and the methodology that would be used were explained, emphasizing that I would not be the primary decision-maker; instead, we would all be co-researchers. The group was excited to be involved in the project. We then proceeded to address our first sub-question: “How can different stakeholders share their feedback on C3’s successes and areas for improvement?”

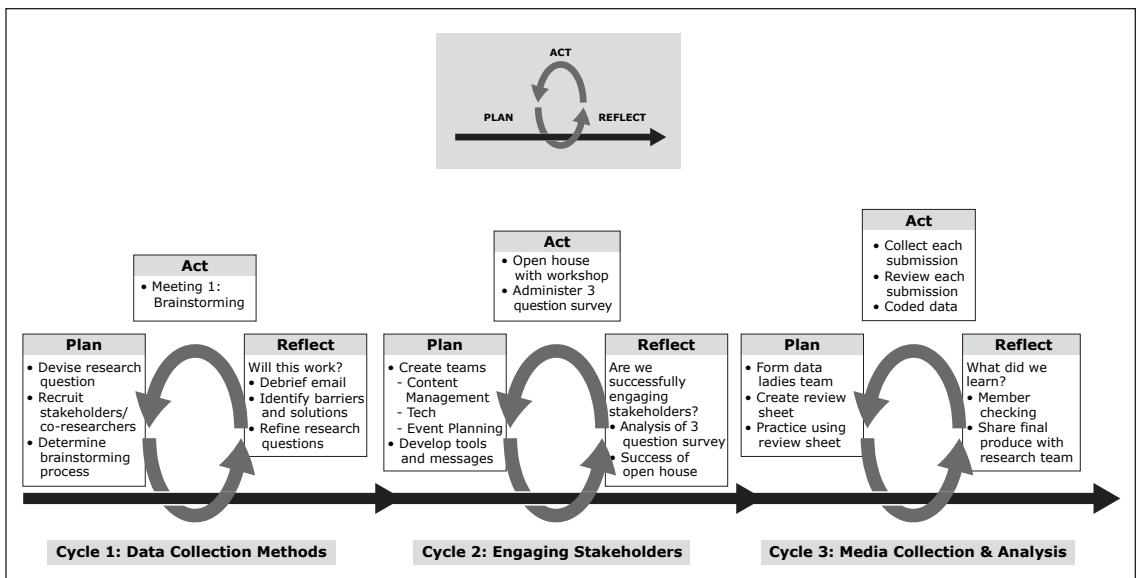
I presented some brief examples of data collection methods (e.g., photovoice, videovoice,

surveys, narratives, interviews, etc.) as many stakeholders would not have been exposed to these methods. We then commenced a brainstorming process in which small groups were asked to consider how they might feel most comfortable sharing their views and opinions about C3. These lively groups recorded their ideas on worksheets, then presented their favorites to the other attendees.

Once all of the ideas had been shared, a full group dialogue commenced and the team came to a compromise around the idea of the C3 Multimedia Project. C3 stakeholders would be invited to submit videos, photos, PowerPoint presentations, narratives, or other forms of media that the research team hoped to analyze. We shared this idea via email with the stakeholders who were not in attendance, then scheduled our second meeting.

One week later, we hosted our second meeting including 25 participants representing every defined group of stakeholders. At this meeting, we reflected upon whether or not this data collection method would engage a diverse array of participants while also fully addressing the primary research question (i.e., C3’s successes and areas for improvement). Through a facilitated group dialogue, we determined that this would work, but that intentional efforts would be necessary to overcome obstacles and avoid barriers (e.g., “the digital divide,” timeframe, opportunities to provide negative feedback through these media). We also felt that we should perhaps focus the media submissions around some smaller, more focused questions. A C3 partner suggested three focal questions, and the research team embraced them:

**Figure 1.** Project Methodology



- What is C3?
- What has C3 done for me?
- What more could C3 do for me?

These conclusions led to our next cycle of planning, acting, and reflecting.

**Cycle 2: Engaging stakeholders.** At the conclusion of our second meeting and throughout our third meeting (with 12 attendees), the C3 Multimedia Project Research Team devised a plan for how we would introduce the C3 Multimedia Project to our peers (other C3 volunteers and partners), while addressing the concerns raised in our first cycle. We chose to form multiple teams, each of which would have separate responsibilities. Three teams were established to accomplish near-term goals related to this research project: a Content Management Team, a Tech Team, and an Event Planning Team. All 87 participants on the research team were invited to join a team and/or recruit other C3 stakeholders for participation. In total, 25 stakeholders chose to participate in one of these three teams (with fairly even distribution across the teams).

These three teams worked both independently and together to develop messages, tools, and guidelines for the Multimedia Project. Together, they planned the Celebrate C3's Creativity Open House. These efforts involved an additional four to five in-person meetings per team and a great deal of email correspondence, in addition to planning and collaboration using Google documents. This represented a tremendous amount of work on the part of all involved, particularly given the short timeframe (less than one month from the determination of the data collection method to the open house).

The culmination of this work, the open house, brought together 42 volunteers and partners to discuss this project. The three teams led different workshops in which, for example, participants were introduced to the three main focal questions, or had the opportunity to learn how to use the flip cameras the tech team had purchased that were available on loan to anyone in need. There were also opportunities to get suggestions on best practices for storytelling, interviewing, and filming. Finally, there was time and space to brainstorm ideas for multimedia submissions, and to network and/or find collaborators for a specific submission.

A video of the main information session from the open house, as well as a summary of the logistical details for the project (e.g., how, where, and when to submit media content) was emailed out to the research team the day after the event. Thirty

people responded with their intent to submit something before the deadline on March 23, 2012.

As a final aspect of this cycle, everyone at the open house was asked to submit their initial brainstormed responses to the focal questions above at the conclusion of the event. This provided an additional data set: the Three Question Survey. These surveys were coded by keywords that were then grouped into emergent themes. The research team reflected upon whether or not the emergent themes were addressing our research questions to determine whether or not we were successfully engaging stakeholders as intended by our plan. We agreed that based upon: a) the success of the open house (i.e., the attendance and level of participation), and b) the fact that the initial feedback from this data set was successfully addressing our primary research question, we had been successful in engaging stakeholders in this process. We were ready for the next cycle.

**Cycle 3: Media collection and analysis.** C3 stakeholders interested in submitting content for this project were instructed to upload their submissions to a folder in a shared Dropbox account the tech team set up for this purpose. In this way, large files (like videos) could be shared electronically. By the assigned date, we received 15 submissions, including input from 118 C3 teachers (and their students), leaders, trainees, and partners. Eight of these were video submissions, four were PowerPoints including words and photos, and the rest were based on the written word (e.g., poems, narratives).

The research team and all of the attendees of the open house were invited to participate in the data analysis team. Four women (two C3 leaders, a C3 leader/partner, and one C3 teacher) agreed to lead this effort. They promptly renamed themselves "the Data Ladies" and proceeded to plan our analysis of the media submissions.

As Wang et al. asserted in their explanation of photovoice methodologies, "photographs are easy to gather but difficult to analyze and summarize because they yield an abundance of complex data that can be difficult to digest" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 375). I would suggest that this is true of most types of multimedia data.

Our project, in many ways, follows traditional photovoice and videovoice methodologies, except that we worked with multiple forms of media on a very tight timeframe and, as a result, were unable to engage all participants in suggested methods of participatory analysis—independently selecting and contextualizing, then collaboratively codifying.

In other words, participants first identify for themselves what information to share (i.e., “select”), then tell stories that clarify why the information is being shared (i.e., “contextualize”), then finally work together to identify emerging themes across each participant’s information and stories (i.e., “codify”) (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 380). We had asked all submitters to select and contextualize their submission independently; it was then up to the Data Ladies to codify what they saw. As peers of all of the submitters, we hoped that the Data Ladies would be able to offer representative feedback. While this was not a methodological ideal, it was a suitable adaptation given the realities we faced (Wang & Burris, 1997).

In order to make the data easier to digest, we devised a two-stage process of codification. First, we reviewed all of the submissions and, avoiding interpretation, “sorted” the data into three categories, guided by our three focal questions (“What is C3? What has C3 done for me? What more could C3 do for me?”). Each submission was reviewed by three separate reviewers; myself and two others selected at random. Quotes and descriptions from the submissions were entered into review sheets with one submission represented per sheet. This provided a common format for all of the data, simplifying the second stage of codification in which themes were uncovered.

The Data Ladies and I met once before the review process began to practice reviewing a few submissions and make edits to the review sheets. Then, each Data Lady worked independently on her reviews over the course of one week.

Once I received all of the review sheets (three per submission), I created an Excel spreadsheet for each category (e.g., one spreadsheet for “What is C3?”, etc.) and copied all of our data (the quotes and descriptions each of us highlighted in our review processes) into the corresponding spreadsheet. Given the fact that we all represent different perspectives (and in keeping with our collaborative research methodology), I did not omit anything offered on the review sheets. I functioned from the assumption that we each had valid interpretations to offer.

I read through each collection of data (i.e., the quotes and descriptions on each spreadsheet) and took note of any themes that emerged for each question. I then read through each quote/snippet of information and asked myself, “Does this first theme match this piece of information?” If it did, I placed the assigned number for the corresponding theme next to the snippet of information. I repeated

this process for all of the themes, resulting in a spreadsheet with three columns: the name of the submitter, the quote/snippet of information, and the corresponding theme. If a single quote applied to multiple themes, I copied the quote in the spreadsheet; therefore, many pieces of data appeared multiple times (with different numbered themes next to them).

After all of the themes had been assigned to the data, I sorted the entire spreadsheet by theme. I then used the name of the media submitter (connected to each snippet of information) to determine how many submissions referenced each theme.

We decided that if a theme was referenced in at least four of the 15 submissions (for “What is C3?” and “What has C3 done for me?”) or two of the eight submissions (for “What more could C3 do for me?” which had far fewer responses), it was significant (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestrong, 2004).

The data analysis team was also given the opportunity to provide their own reflections on each submission as a means of bracketing their own interpretations and expressing their opinions/making meaning of these media submissions. In the same manner described above, I compiled all of the reflections from the data analysis team in a spreadsheet, and identified key themes.

To conclude this cycle, I engaged the Data Ladies in member checking. I sent a description of our analysis process, the list of themes, and the accompanying interpretation to the Data Ladies for their feedback and approval. Slight changes were made at their suggestion, and the resultant text is included above in the **Methodology** and below in the **Results of Data Analysis** and **Findings** sections of this report.

## **Results of Data Analysis**

Two data sets from this project were essential to addressing our primary research question, “How can we improve the Chicago Conservation Corps program and continue its successes?” Several themes emerged from the analysis of these data sets.

### *Three Question Survey*

This survey, administered at the Celebrate C3’s Creativity Open House, had 30 respondents. Responses to the question “What is C3?” resulted in the emergence of 11 keywords connected to five themes (Table 1). Twenty-four respondents (80%) made a reference to the environmental or conservation focus of the program. Eight respondents

**Table 1.** Number of Respondents Using Keywords and Themes in Response to "What is Chicago Conservation Corps/Clubs?"

Keyword	Theme	Number of Respondents
Environment/Environmental	Environment/Conservation	18
Chicago/ans	Local Focus	12
Community	Local Focus	9
Educate/ion	Training/Education	9
Leader/s/ship	Training/Education	9
Program	Training/Education	7
Conserve/ing/ation	Environment/Conservation	6
Organization	People	6
Networks	People	5
Volunteer/s	People	4
[non-profit]/Clubs	Misunderstood Question	4

solely emphasized that people were central to the program. They used words like network, volunteers, leaders, and environmentalists, describing the program primarily by who was involved. They talked about the opportunities to collaborate, make friends, and organize. For example, one participant described C3 as "an engaged community of Chicagoans with an environmental focus." Nine respondents emphasized C3's training/education focus, as a place to get resources and information. They use terms like "educate" and "program." One respondent said, "An excellent training and support program for environmental projects which support Chicago's conservation goals." Six of the respondents emphasized the importance of both the "people" and the "program."

Using the terms "Chicago" and "community," 14 respondents emphasized the local impacts of the program. They stated that this program has impacts for Chicago residents and for their communities. Four people took this question somewhat literally, misunderstanding its intent, providing a definition of the acronym "C3"—Chicago Conservation Corps.

For the second question, "What has C3 done for me?," 10 keywords emerged, encompassing three main themes (Table 2).

Ten respondents emphasized that C3 had taught them something new about Chicago, environmentalism, or community activism. One respondent said, "C3 has

given me lots of knowledge about all types of things like weatherization, composting, etc." Twenty-one respondents felt that C3 has provided a great means for accessing people and resources (e.g., partners, communities, materials), with a heavy emphasis on social networks. Respondents talked about "gathering with like-minded people," "creating community," and "increasing the number of amazing people in [their] live[s]." They claim that C3 got them "out of the house and into the community" and "taught them to be a leader in [their] community and connect people to these issues." Five respondents emphasized that C3 helped them "make a difference" or "gave [them] a sense of empowerment."

Finally, for the third question, "What more could C3 do for me?," the two keywords that emerged

from the responses were "continue," with seven responses, and "more," with 10 responses. Eleven respondents suggested that C3 should continue its current efforts, by "continuing to expand upon what's already been done" and "continuing to provide the programming and services needed to assist with the beautification of our city." They want "more of the same." Five respondents said that they themselves need to take better advantage of existing opportunities. One respondent said she needed to be "more self-motivated," and another said he needed "to up [his] game to take better advantage of everything C3 offers." Six respondents

**Table 2.** Number of Respondents Using Keywords and Themes in Response to "What Has [Nonprofit] Done for Me?"

Keyword	Theme	Number of Respondents
People	Networking	13
Knowledge	Learning	7
Connect	Networking	7
Network	Networking	7
Train	Learning	3
Educate	Learning	2
Individuals	Networking	2
Difference	Making a Difference	2
Empower	Making a Difference	2
Impact	Making a Difference	1



said that C3 should improve its outreach by “motivating more Chicagoans,” “reaching out to more neighborhoods,” “promoting itself better,” and “making the C3 group a household name.”

*C3 Multimedia Project*

The 15 submissions of media content for this project were first coded by focal question. Then, themes were determined under each focal question.

For the first question, “What is C3?,” six themes emerged from the 15 submissions relating to the people involved in or affected by C3 (“who”), and 13 themes emerged that relate to C3’s activities (“what”). These themes and the corresponding number of submissions can be found in Table 3.

For the second question, “What has C3 done for me?,” eight themes emerged from the 15 submissions (Table 4). For the third question, “What more could C3 do for me?,” only eight submissions provided data. Three themes emerged: five submissions suggested that C3 should offer more workshops and trainings on new topics like jobs, cycling, gardening, and waste reduction; four submissions suggested that C3 should expand and better publicize itself; and two submissions suggested that C3 should provide more materials.

Finally, the Data Ladies’ reflections on the media submissions offered further insight into the project overall. Six themes emerged, each of which was referenced by at least two reviewers and occurred across multiple submissions (Table 5).

**Table 3.** Number of Submissions Addressing Themes Related to the Question of “What is C3?”

Theme	Subcategory	No. of Submissions
Training and education, skill development	What	12
Pro-environmental behaviors	What	11
Environment or “Earth” Focus	What	9
Provides a network (e.g., friendships, support from peers)	What	9
Clubs	Who	8
Schools	Who	7
“Chicago” or urban focus	What	7
Help, assistance, or support from C3 and/or C3 staff	What	7
Waste reduction, recycling, vermicomposting	What	6
Volunteers, individuals, leaders, people	Who	6
Educating others (includes speaking and presenting)	What	5
Students, kids, youth	Who	5
Partners/partnerships	Who	5
Green space, plants, gardens	What	4
Communities	Who	4
Energy conservation	What	4
Materials, funding (for materials)	What	4
Affirmations (e.g., “C3 is great!” or “C3 is amazing!”)	What	4
Direct quote of the C3 motto	What	4

**Table 4.** Number of Submissions Addressing Themes Related to the Question of “What Has C3 Done for Me?”

Theme	No. of Submissions
“Made a Difference/”had a positive impact”	11
Taught, educated, or trained	11
Led me to engage/educate others	10
Offered project support (e.g., staff guidance, project guides, materials, project-related encouragement)	10
Connected me to a network	9
Provided opportunities, “a chance”	7
Elicited positive feelings (e.g., enjoyment, pride, fun, excitement, appreciation, inspiration, hope)	6
Celebrated my accomplishments	4

**Findings**

The data analysis from both the 3 Question Survey and the C3 Multimedia Project revealed several common themes. Regarding the first focal question of “What is C3?,” both data sets revealed an emphasis on the people involved, the local focus of the program, the educational opportunities, and the conservation focus of the program; the multimedia submissions, however, went into even greater depth on these issues.

**Table 5.** Number of Submissions and Reviewers Addressing Common Themes

Theme	No. of Submissions	No. of Reviewers
Comment on evident positive influence/impact of C3	9	5
Ability to relate, connections to other submissions (e.g., "I feel/she felt the same way")	7	4
Intergenerational activities	6	4
Enthusiasm reflected in submission	5	4
Sincerity of submission	5	3
Representation of simple acts, everyday life	5	3

Regarding the second question, "What has C3 done for me?", there were also similar themes such as networking, learning, and empowerment.

For the third focal question, it seemed that the written responses offered not only more data, but also consistently addressed the same themes: the continuation of the program, the desire to participate in more C3 activities, and the need for improved outreach. The Multimedia Project offered support for these same themes, but not as consistently across all of the responses, perhaps because submitters seemed to spend less time and energy addressing this question.

Knowing that the same themes emerged consistently from separate data sets, we can now apply this information with confidence to our original research question ("How can we improve the Chicago Conservation Corps program and continue its successes?") and ask ourselves what we have learned.

It would seem that our research participants feel that we successfully engage a diversity of stakeholders in our program (e.g., schools, adult volunteers, partner organizations, communities). The resultant network is something they consider "important" and of which they are "proud" to be a part. They not only describe C3 as a network, but describe that network as something that has benefited them.

Training and education were also featured, both as a trait of C3 and as a beneficial outcome for C3 participants. It would also seem that this training addresses a wide array of environmental subject matter. Topics that were important enough to participants that they were worthy of inclusion in their submissions include: waste reduction/management, green space, energy conservation, and general environmental issues.

It would also seem that C3 encourages pro-environmental behavior; people feel that their

involvement in C3 has helped them "make a difference." Several respondents and submitters recognize that one manner in which they can take action is by educating others; they say that C3 has played a prominent role in preparing them to do so.

Research participants also felt that project support from C3 staff was a major characteristic of the program and had impacted them and their efforts significantly. Some even referenced the importance of C3's materials and funding to their efforts.

Overall, it seems that C3 elicits a lot of positive feelings; research participants even offered direct affirmations of C3 like "C3 is great," "C3 is amazing," or "Joining C3 is the best decision I have ever made." Several research participants also felt that their efforts were celebrated and recognized by C3, particularly referencing our annual celebrations and graduations and the praise they have received from C3 staff. One submitter even included copies of the thank-you notes he had received from C3 staff, as he held on to them and considered them a symbol of his success.

We can compare this list of successes to C3's mission statement: "to recruit, train and support a network of volunteers who work together to improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods through environmental service projects that protect our water, clean our air, restore our land and save energy" ([https://www.volunteermatch.org/search/org201584.jsp#more\\_info\\_tab](https://www.volunteermatch.org/search/org201584.jsp#more_info_tab)).

Interestingly, it seems that the research participants addressed nearly every aspect of C3's mission statement. If C3 recognizes alignment with its mission as a sign of success, it would seem that the program is doing very well.

Regarding areas for improvement, C3 might choose to invest more effort into the neglected aspect of the mission statement (air quality). Based upon the participants' feedback, C3 could also offer more workshops and continuing education

options, perhaps even soliciting suggestions for topics, as many were offered through this research process (e.g., green jobs, bicycling, home gardening). There is also an expressed desire for C3 to continue expanding and “getting its name out there.” Some of the submissions also suggested that C3 could offer additional types of project materials.

## Conclusion

This participatory action research project certainly accomplished its goal of evaluating the Chicago Conservation Corps, including diverse perspectives from representative populations of C3’s stakeholders. Leaders, trainees, clubs, teachers, partners, and staff were all engaged in the design and implementation of this project. The level of engagement, combined with the analysis of the data, is indicative of the commitment of C3’s stakeholders to this program. For comparison’s sake, a videovoice project in New Orleans offered its participants a \$200 stipend, their own camera, and technical training in videography and editing for their participation in the project (Catalani, Veneziale, Campbell, Herbst, Butler, Springgate, & Minkler, 2012). We offered no such incentives, yet received a significant and meaningful response. Personally, the support, enthusiasm, and honesty garnered through this project far exceeded my expectations, and I was already coming from a place of great respect and appreciation for this program and its participants.

## Relevancy Five Years Later

Since July 2012, the Chicago Conservation Corps has been managed by the Chicago Academy of Sciences/Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, a long-standing partner of the program during its tenure in Chicago. A significant contributing factor to the Nature Museum’s interest in stewarding C3 was their staff’s participation in this research project. Not only was the commitment of C3’s stakeholders made evident, but the findings from the research (C3’s interest in fostering pro-environmental behaviors, providing environmental training, and promoting networking across the field) showed the program’s alignment with the Nature Museum’s vision to serve as a leading voice in urban ecology and sustainability for the Midwest and Great Lakes Region. Using the clear direction indicated by this research, the museum has continued C3’s efforts, growing our leader base to more than 700 participants. The program is now fully funded through the Nature Museum; the program has successfully transitioned

from city ownership without losing sight of its mission and continually engaging the program’s stakeholders in meaningful ways.

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