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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

**Building Capacity for Community-Based Participatory Research:
Experiences from the Grand Valley State University
Student Consulting Center**

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The nascent Information Age witnessed the birth of the Internet, increasingly rapid advancements in technology and is now bringing with it the "democratization of data." Data democratization is making information that once was available to only a select few now the purview of nearly everyone. Democratizing data refers to a combination of policy and technology innovations that make government and other administrative data available to anyone with a computer and access to the Internet. Indeed, President Obama campaigned on the idea of open government and the democratization of data, launching Data.gov – a single website to making economic, health, environmental and other government data available on a single website. These and other powerful forces have aligned, *potentially* putting new knowledge into the hands of those who can make the appropriate changes to improve the health and well-being of their communities.

As communities have come to recognize the potential to use information in making local decisions, so has a growing sense of need to measure program outcomes. This in turn has brought with it a renewed interest and the proliferation of community-based participatory research (CBPR). The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) defines CBPR as a “collaborative research approach designed to ensure and establish structures for participation by communities affected by the issue being studied, representatives of organizations, and researchers in all aspects of the research process to improve health and well-being through taking action, including social change.” Yet harnessing the full power to wholly realize the potential of CBPR remains an elusive goal for many reasons. A 2004 evaluation conducted by the RTI International and the University of North Carolina for AHRQ outlined a number of challenges

inherent in CBPR while providing recommendations to enhance the outcomes and usefulness of such projects. Among the challenges and recommendations offered by the authors:

- Improving the quality of the research through the selection of appropriate study design and research methods while also considering an analysis and dissemination plan that benefits the entire community;
- Ensuring that capacity-building in collaborative research occurs for both the community and research team; and
- Improving the quality of the CBPR technical reports and publishing those in peer-reviewed literature.

As researchers and educators in the School of Public, Nonprofit and Public Administration (SPNHA) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), recent experiences broadened the list of challenges to include:

- A problem of “information overload” whereby the amount and types of data available result in numerous and often disconnected measures thereby creating difficulties for consumers to draw meaningful and appropriate conclusions from the analysis; and
- A dearth of skills, knowledge and understanding among students to apply theoretically-based information provided through traditional classroom settings to undertake CBPR and CBPR-like projects without close, expert supervision.

In response to the opportunities and challenges afforded by CBPR projects, we designed a vehicle to foster active learning through the creation of the SPNHA Student Consulting Center. The Student Consulting Center is an inter-disciplinary, faculty led, graduate student program

designed to provide healthcare and nonprofit organizations in Michigan the opportunity to work together in solving real-life challenges. As the developed world moves toward knowledge-based industries, traditional, hybrid and online instruction are unlikely to meet the educational needs of neither the students nor the demand for talent and skills that employers require. New pedagogical practices are essential, such as those deemphasizing the traditional teacher-centered dissemination of information to students toward one focused on guiding students in the creation of knowledge and skills. While the graduate programs within GVSU share a number of core courses, such as research methods and organizational theory, there are few opportunities for students to truly engage in cross-disciplinary teamwork in any real or applied way. The Student Consulting Center was created in response to address the limitations of the tradition classroom setting to provide opportunities to hone skills and further cultivate the knowledge acquired as students in SPNHA.

Today, student consultants have engaged in CBPR with the Ottawa County Health Department (OCHD) in building community capacity toward addressing food insecurity. With nearly 20% of the Michigan populations receiving food stamps coupled with increasing rates of obesity and obesity-related chronic disease, student consultants conducted an environmental scan for OCHD in support of a larger food security strategic planning initiative. Students employed Geographic Information Systems to map measureable health indicators at the census tract level with the ultimate goal of the project to provide stakeholders with the information required make appropriate investment decisions at the community level. Based on Healthy People 2020 indicators, the analysis and subsequent baseline measures are being used to monitor changes and to gain understanding of the extent to which community needs are being met relative to other

areas of the state and nation. For example, student consultants are creating a website to map the proportion of the population with access to nutrient dense foods (Objective NWS-4) while also surveying emergency food providers (churches and nonprofits) about capacities to provide such staples as lean meats, fresh fruits and vegetables to those seeking services. In addition, student consultants analyzed health indicators associated with social determinants of health, such as poverty, ethnicity, age, and income. As a result, students are developing practical skills and expertise required of future public health leaders to bridge the gap between research and practice within the communities of Ottawa County to improve health while reducing food insecurity.

In Newaygo County, a second team of student consultants recently completed an important component of a larger strategic planning initiative, for the Fremont Area Community Foundation (FACF). Student consultants also conducted an environmental assessment to provide stakeholders a deeper and more focused understanding of community needs to assist the FACF with appropriate investment decisions at the community level. Within FACF's mission of improving the quality of life for people in Newaygo County, the focus of the project was to develop and map important summary measures to assist with monitoring community health and well-being. By using the information provided from the student consultants' analysis the overall goal of the project was simple - to better inform both grantors and grantees. In essence, better ideas result in a wiser use of funds. With this key tenet in mind, the work is envisioned as a tool for community advocates to visualize and develop appropriate interventions for creating healthy, inspired, and sustainable communities in Newaygo County.

While the nascent development and approach of the Student Consulting Center have yielded promising results, the push to elevate and broaden active learning will continue. These active and real-time learning laboratories can advance CBPR models while demonstrating how learning and practice can come together in an authentic context. By encouraging innovative thinking, developing competencies and initiating truly collaborative work, the full potential and promise of data democratization and CBPR may be realized. To read more about the SPNHA Student Consulting Center or to contact the Center Director about a potential CBPR project, please see:

- <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/borderss/index.html>

To read more about the FACF CBPR project, please see the temporary website created for the FACF. This work will be transferred to a permanent location on the FACF website in the future. <http://www.tfaf.org> and <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/borderss/project.html>.

To read more about the OCHD CBPR project, please see:

- <http://www.feedingtowa.org>

This work was an Oral presentation at the 2012 140th Annual APHA Meeting in San Francisco, California.