

## The Undergraduate Perspective on Community-Based Research

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*This article, written by four undergraduates with extensive experience in community-based research (CBR), summarizes each author's project and offers their views on conditions necessary for CBR success and benefits of CBR for students.*

"What we learn to do, we learn by doing."  
—Aristotle

Over the last decade, universities across the country have increasingly recognized that ideologically- and financially-committed institutional support for community engagement pedagogy is necessary to improve the university and community. Institutions such as many of the more than 800 members of Campus Compact, a coalition of universities that have made express commitments to community service, reflect the increasing understanding that verbal, written, and financial support are necessary steps toward actualizing larger visions that have atrophied for much of the last century (Zlotkowski, 1996).

An important component of this movement toward civic engagement in higher education is community-based research (CBR). An emerging practice to engage students in research *with* the community in conjunction with academic courses, CBR is becoming an increasingly prominent choice of civic engagement in classrooms across the country. CBR is distinct in its in-depth student engagement in a collaborative research project with the goal of social change. Delving further into community partnerships than short-term direct service work allows, CBR offers numerous potential benefits for all parties. As with service-learning, more and more is written about the benefits of CBR (Kellet & Goldstein, 1999; Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997).

As individuals who have experienced significant personal and intellectual growth through involvement in CBR as part of our institutions' commitment to service-learning, we hope that CBR will be recognized as an intensive form of service-learning, wherein collaboration with the community toward social change is at the center of academic

research. The CBR community has the potential to experience the same benefits that have been attributed to well-executed service-learning experiences (Eyler & Giles, 1999). We urge CBR practitioners to more systematically investigate and document the benefits of CBR to all its partners, but especially to students.

As student practitioners of CBR, we are in a unique position to document and validate CBR's effects on students who engage in it. The student perspective brings insight from a different place and different culture. Students provide questions that clarify and help to fine-tune the research practices and principles. They provide the youthful and invigorating labor-intensive hours that many other practitioners do not have the time to offer. Finally, student perspectives help affirm the very teaching practices faculty use in their courses. While many faculty papers strive to represent CBR's value to undergraduates, the experiences of, and effects on, students are best communicated by students themselves.

The field has firmly established that CBR involving undergraduate students must effectively integrate the targeted knowledge base of the curriculum and the research component to result in a highly positive learning experience for the student. However, little is known about the effects upon students' personal, practical, and interpersonal skills development and social responsibility. Previous research, in fact, has largely forgotten the undergraduate student perspective, addressing it only tangentially through secondhand observation or ad hoc aggregations of student perspectives (Strand, 2000; Troppe, 1994). Much of the literature to date on CBR has described effective campus-community partnerships that use research as a primary activity (Nyden et al., 1997). In many cases, what has resulted is a better understanding of principles that occur across all such research projects. Consequently, practitioners may

have inadvertently already taken the first steps toward looking at CBR's benefits for the undergraduate student.

Across the variations of this work (e.g., participatory action research, CBR, participatory research, community-based participatory research), practitioners have established principles of good practice, including: 1) collaboration is a key component and necessary factor for a project's success; 2) community goals and objectives are primary in the eyes and actions of those involved in the research project; 3) the use of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methods of study; and 4) the integration of knowledge and findings into the social, political, and economic structures that directly or indirectly impact those communities with whom the research is conducted (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Israel, 2000; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohugh, forthcoming). We assert that future inquiry into the effects of CBR on students and the university begin with these principles as a guiding framework.

The need for more extensive study on the student's role in CBR remains, but the four case studies presented here provide a crucial first step in broadening understanding of CBR benefits to undergraduates. This article aims to shed light on prior perspectives of faculty and community members by validating previous research findings on benefits of CBR to students with an inside view of students' experiences with CBR. Ultimately, by bringing our documented experience into the CBR dialogue, we hope to improve the understanding of the field and achieve better practice.

This article presents the student perspective through an analysis of four undergraduates' experiences. The experiences are aggregated to draw conclusions regarding the conditions necessary for effective CBR projects and benefits of CBR to students.

### The Research Projects

The authors conducted CBR under the direction of faculty members and in collaboration with community partners.

- Peresie and two other undergraduates completed a program evaluation of New Leaf Services, Inc., an Atlanta organization that sells vehicles at minimal cost to low-income households. The research used participant surveys and follow-up interviews with program participants and staff to evaluate how closely the program outcomes matched the program goals, the characteristics of people served, and the participants' use of vehicles. The students conducted a preliminary impact

assessment, made recommendations for program improvement and expansion, and did a comparison analysis between New Leaf's model and similar programs across the country. The study was shared with other similar car rental programs to stimulate exchange of information. As a result of Peresie's research, New Leaf Services made changes in its program implementation to better reflect the needs of the population served. Peresie conducted her research as part of an upper-level undergraduate political science course.

- Working with a small team of undergraduates, Stockmann spearheaded the Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI) Collaborative Curriculum Development Project as part of an academically-based action-oriented seminar at the University of Pennsylvania. As a Penn Program in Public Service intern, Stockmann conducted intensive research on democratic education and integrated, learner-centered, experiential curriculum development in connection with her work at a nutrition and health-based summer camp. This work evolved into being more of this kind of teaching into urban public schools and contributed to real change in the local community's education and health. The team created a framework for consolidating and organizing previously developed and newly designed science and health-based curricula to enable better teaching practice of these subjects in the partner schools, and thereby improve community health through undergraduate-teacher-classroom partnerships.
- Waldref conducted welfare reform corporate accountability research for the Washington Interfaith Network (WIN), a Washington, D.C. affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of independent community organizations that works to motivate citizen action through diverse networks of faith, labor, and community groups. She collected her data through interviews with personnel in federal agencies, non-profit corporate accountability watchdog groups, and corporations involved in welfare-to-work programs. Waldref produced a final written report tracing the multiple federal funding sources for private sector welfare-to-work programs and identifying corporate targets for a welfare reform accountability campaign. With her research results, WIN organizers and community leaders assessed their ability to conduct a successful corporate

accountability campaign during the Congressional reauthorization of welfare reform in fall 2002, and shared the research with the network of Industrial Areas Foundation organizations to encourage collaborative campaign efforts. Waldref's research was facilitated through an upper-level undergraduate CBR course in the Sociology department.

- Willis was the only student on a four-member team conducting a process evaluation of Turning the Page, a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing family literacy and strengthening bonds between schools and District of Columbia families. His research looked at the attainment of the organization's short- and long-term goals through participant surveys, interviews, and pre- and post-test worksheets. The evaluation benefited the organization in several ways. First, it provided a model for conducting collaborative research with the community. Second, the review of the internal operations of the organization provided feedback about how to improve the organization's work. Finally, because the research was shared with others working on family literacy in the local area as well as nationally through presentations and publications, it promoted the replication of successful practices.

### Necessary Conditions for Successful CBR Projects

Based on our diverse CBR experiences, we have identified five necessary conditions for conducting successful CBR projects: set goals, set realistic expectations and time frames, establish clear support systems, ensure prior relevant experience and skills, and facilitate personal investment in the project.

#### *Set Goals*

Setting concrete goals provides guidance and creates the context for action-based community work. From the onset of our projects, the partners together established clear research guidelines. For instance, before beginning her work, Peresie, her classmates, professor, and community partners determined the research's primary purpose—to fine-tune the program model and provide information to prospective funders—and geared all work toward meeting these two specific goals.

“We didn't try to establish hard and fast barriers, but merely wanted to establish the parameters in which we would work,” Peresie said. “This was invaluable in keeping us focused later on. With the

purpose of the project as our compass, we were better able to map out each step of our project.” Although flexibility in the research design is key to an effective CBR project, initially constructing project parameters is essential for success. Students need to clearly understand the CBR project goals.

Our experience and research showed that collaborative partnerships are most successful when the parties independently consider their own interests and goals first. Then the partners can come together to discuss and negotiate the research partnership's goals and objectives, as well as individual and team actions necessary to achieve these ends. Stockmann and Peresie found that it was useful to draft a written document of the agreed upon goals and objectives, distribute it liberally, and refer to it often throughout the partnership. Such a document had to be understood as a living work, subject to group modifications as necessary. Although the process of establishing and agreeing upon clear objectives takes time, if goal development is overlooked or hurried, the consequences are likely to be a short-lived program and hesitancy about future collaborations.

Consistent with much of the research on university-community collaboration, Stockmann found—both in her own work and role as a liaison between Penn students and the community—that programs are successful when specific research needs are identified first by community members. While students interested in CBR might identify a general subject or “problem” area (e.g., homelessness), they only will be able to develop a successful CBR project if they work with the community partner to define the specific research area. For example, a group of students was very interested in helping a local school increase parental involvement in school activities. After devising a loose plan for action, based on research in academic journals and case studies, they began to meet with the teachers at the school. Only then did they discover that communication between parents and teachers was remarkably infrequent and mostly negative. They found that in order to engage parents more positively in the school they would have to start creating better communication. This smaller, but critically important task, became the focus of the students' work. Because the teachers and parents were very interested in finding a solution to this problem, the students found a surprisingly high rate of return on the survey they developed and were able to generate significant and helpful recommendations that were distributed to the school faculty and administrators. Then plans were made for future communication and parent involvement activities. If critical time is taken to establish goals, partners

can hedge many of the frustrations and challenges endemic to campus-community collaborations.

To formulate these initial goals, we found it useful to contact other resources or programs for guidance. The Penn students working on parental involvement worked closely with the school's assistant principal and a community leader who pioneered parent involvement initiatives in other local schools. Waldref turned for direction to local nonprofits and think tanks such as the Economic Policy Institute, Urban Institute, Institute for Policy Studies, Good Jobs First, and Center for Community Change, all of which regularly research welfare reform programs. Peresie contacted organizations with similar missions to the one she was researching, while Willis worked with other family literacy groups as well as school teachers.

### *Set Realistic Expectations and Time Frames*

Idealistic college students often enter projects wanting to change the world or ameliorate social ills. By trying to do too much, students may fall victim to their own lofty ambitions that can preclude having much impact. Other students may do nothing rather than aim high and fail. Working with our professors and community partners, we assessed what we could realistically do, requisite skills for the projects, and the activities that would best help the community. With careful concern for the needs of all parties involved, the teams established realistic expectations. In Ira Harkavy's seminar at Penn, for instance, Stockmann and other student partners engaged in extensive class discussions and workshops to help narrow down students' "ill-defined problem space" into specific and manageable activities. Once identified, professors and fellow students helped to determine specific steps necessary to achieve the project objectives. Establishing clear parameters for a research study ensured that realistic expectations were set.

While setting goals facilitates realistic expectations, some flexibility needs to be built in. As Waldref's corporate accountability research project progressed at WIN, consistent review and revision necessitated expectation adjustments. Waldref explains:

Throughout the research process, I encountered barriers accessing federal tax credit and subsidy amounts granted to corporations for hiring TANF recipients. In discussion of these difficulties with WIN, we adjusted our timetable and project focus. Our goal of identifying specific dollar amounts of federal subsidies changed to exposing multiple funding streams and lack of corporate accountability

for these public funds. By modifying the focus of my work, I was able to move forward on my research, and WIN received a more useful final product.

Along with realistic expectations, there is also a need for realistic time frames. Given the depth of CBR projects, the work often does not easily fit into the traditional semester. Willis's work took nine months to complete, while Waldref spent nearly a year on her CBR project. Stockmann's project is ongoing and continues to adapt to public school environment realities. Peresie and her peers finished the bulk of their work during a semester, but only because they were forced to do so to receive a final course grade; a longer time frame would have allowed them to produce a better final project.

Because a timeframe longer than a semester is often needed, professors need to be open to problem-solving how students can extend their research beyond the semester. Although a structure for continuing CBR work beyond a semester is not yet widely available to students, some professors at the University of Pennsylvania have provided the means necessary for students to continue and deepen their research, such as independent study courses, focused senior theses, and even hiring students to do their work as work-study students or research assistants.

### *Establish Clear Support Systems*

Though the nature of our support systems varied, we all had opportunities for regular guidance from, and contact with, our professors and community partners, as well as access to various other resources. Waldref found her support system within the organization where she was working. She met one or two times a month with WIN's lead organizer and attended the organization's monthly general meetings, a community organizing training workshop, and an accountability action meeting. The staff provided guidance and advice for the monthly research updates she produced for the organization. Peresie's course instructor utilized students' CBR projects in his teaching, identifying linkages between course material and the students' fieldwork. In addition, Peresie was supported in her research by Emory's Office of University-Community Partnerships, which provided assistance through a graduate fellow and research staff. Stockmann drew on the immense resources of Penn's Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) for both intellectual and programmatic support. Willis sought advice and resources for his work from faculty and staff at Catholic University's Department of Education.

As undergraduate students' demand to engage in CBR continues to increase as a result of both

national and institutional initiatives, there will be a need for strong student support systems equipped to advise and meet the needs of a broader student corps. As charter members of the Penn Center for Community Partnerships Student Advisory Board, Stockmann and her colleagues are developing a better support network to aid undergraduates interested in pursuing individual or small group CBR projects. Stockmann is also working with the Penn CCP to increase the number of undergraduate teaching assistants experienced with community and public school partners to support the dozens of Penn professors already engaged in CBR or interested in incorporating community problem-solving into their undergraduate courses. Students, faculty, and community members must contribute to such networks in order to provide the support, guidance, and direction undergraduates need in conducting CBR.

Both teamwork and cooperation among CBR partners provides implicit support crucial to research efforts. In our projects, collaboration among the community, professor, and students, enabled mutually beneficial relationships, and the sharing of bi-directional expertise. All parties provided new perspectives, ideas, and a desire to positively affect the community. By relying on each individual's strengths and empowering all partners through collaborative, democratic decision-making and program implementation, the potential benefits of this kind of work are magnified.

Supportive teamwork amongst students working together on a project is important. One group at Penn turned their attention to the campus community, researching the community involvement levels on campus and ways to increase awareness and action within the student body. Their team consisted of two seniors and two freshmen. In the evaluation of the experience, each member of the group commented on their successful chemistry. Both seniors commended the freshman for their vigor, energy, and enthusiasm, as well as their knowledge of the frosh experience. The first year students, in turn, were pleased to have the seniors' knowledge of the campus and campus activities as well as academic research skills. All four members found that they learned as much from their team members as from the research they conducted. Their project resulted in several, concrete, well-reasoned, empirically-based proposals to increase student involvement on campus. The first year members of this group plan to continue to implement some of the proposals over the next few years.

#### *Ensure Prior Experience and Skills*

Because CBR is a form of experiential learning, skills are necessarily developed through community engagement. To be successful, however, students

must draw heavily on prior experience and acquired knowledge. While all of us were new to CBR, we brought to our respective projects both skills and experiences upon which we could draw, such as prior extracurricular activities and academic coursework. All of us had taken research methods courses and had at least some experience in conducting independent, intensive, and long-term research. Furthermore, we also had knowledge of the substantive area on which we were focusing, i.e., curriculum development. Absent prior experiences and skill development, projects would not have been nearly as successful.

Although it may be tempting to use CBR as a creative means of providing students' first-time exposure to material, our experiences show that it is difficult and impractical to develop a constructive CBR project without drawing on prior experiences in academic research and community involvement. Indeed, even with our extensive past work none of us felt fully prepared. Two of Peresie's classmates almost abandoned their CBR project because they lacked sufficient prior experience and skills. The enthusiasm these students had for their research could not compensate for a lack of relevant skills and experiences. Had the students developed the necessary skill sets for the projects—even in a short weeklong session at the beginning of the semester—their efforts would have been more successful and valuable.

#### *Facilitate Personal Investment in the Project*

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of building student investment in the CBR project. Often, students come to CBR with a great deal of investment in contributing to community improvement. But efforts during the CBR project can sustain and enhance the initial commitment. Because all members of the research team are involved in each CBR project from the onset, each participant has a real feeling of investment. As students, we were devoted to our projects well beyond just receiving grades. Part of our interest in research is linked to past involvement in community service, but our experiences show that if students are excited about the work they are doing, the quality of the product will be greater. Several conditions contributed to our enthusiasm about our research. Of these, the most significant condition was extended interactions with the community partners. For each of us, the connection to the research process intensified as we gained an understanding of how the research would be used and its importance to the community.

"My desire for WIN to have the resources to launch an effective welfare reform corporate

accountability campaign multiplied during my research,” Waldref states. “Learning about the injustice of corporate welfare and the struggle of low-wage workers in the DC community intensified my commitment to produce a functional and high quality final project.”

Additionally, we felt more invested because we were pursuing projects we had partly designed. In CBR, the student is not just completing a project in accordance with the directions on a syllabus. With the professor and community partner, the student is involved in determining the research question, designing, collecting and analyzing the data, and preparing recommendation reports. If students feel a sense of co-ownership with the project, they will work diligently toward its completion. In fact, investment may extend beyond the end of the CBR project. For example, Stockmann took a job at the Penn CCP after graduation to continue and expand the partnerships she had developed.

### Benefits of Community-Based Research for Students

Our involvement in CBR produced numerous benefits. The most tangible was practical, real-world experience. Our research experiences, however, served as more than just resume builders and opportunities for hands-on learning; our involvement in CBR allowed us to redefine our education, our communities, and our roles in them. CBR provided a focused pathway for coursework and career goals. All of us intend to pursue careers in public service, and we credit our research experiences with molding us into effective agents of social change.

Stockmann redefined her college plans, transferring from the School of Engineering to the School of Arts and Sciences. When others comment that the switch must have resulted from some dramatic change of heart, she responds, “No, it is really all about solving problems. I just chose to switch from solving problems with buildings and bridges to tackling complex challenges of human society and democracy through direct involvement and action.”

How does participation in CBR benefit students? We have identified four areas: enrichment of traditional academic coursework, increased sense of empowerment, greater understanding of social problems, and integration of academics and service.

#### *Enrichment of Traditional Academic Coursework*

CBR allowed us to augment our classroom knowledge and develop real-world skills. In our research projects, we designed evaluation measures such as interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, and gained familiarity with programs such as

Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) to measure and analyze quantitative data. Our experiences also affirm previous observations of student involvement in CBR: “When students must actually do what they have read about ... select a sample, develop a questionnaire, conduct an interview ... they are inclined to approach their work with extra amounts of care and enthusiasm” (Strand, 2000). By working directly with community organizations that require accurate and comprehensive data for grants, and program evaluation and enhancement, students become invested in learning research tools and programs that can produce these results. Peresie notes:

Students often view research techniques as mere instruments—impersonal means to get data and solve problems. In CBR, my research affected real people and definitely mattered to the community. Through reconceptualizing my knowledge as transferable information and my research tools as methods to help others, I better understood the value of much of the information I had previously learned.

Consistent with the research on the academic, intellectual, and emotional benefits of service-learning, we all augmented our interpersonal communication skills through collaboration with diverse groups of partners. We acquired new knowledge about the people and communities we worked with, contributing to our institutional knowledge and awareness. We challenged our problem-solving skills and abilities to think critically and logically through real-world application. While there are considerations when working with real communities and real-world problems, the opportunities this experience provides for students’ intellectual abilities enhances our capacity to actively tackle real-world problems that we will inevitably face in any future occupation.

#### *Sense of Empowerment*

CBR’s benefits to organizations—in the form of data for prospective funders, evaluation of program operations, and recommendations for improvements—are immediately recognizable. These benefits, however, should not eclipse the less visible, but nevertheless powerful, benefits accrued by students—particularly, the empowering influence of undergraduate involvement in CBR. As members of CBR teams, we were able to contribute alongside faculty and community participants to create and strengthen relationships between institutions and communities. Through CBR, we learned to translate knowledge into action and reconceptualized our abilities to use skills to improve commu-

nities. Consequently, we now see ourselves as resources for and with the community. Working as partners with community-based organizations and witnessing the struggles communities face allowed us to redefine our communities and our roles in them. Peresie explains how she came to see herself as a change agent:

CBR transformed my entire concept of community by allowing me to not just work with or learn about a community organization, but really immerse myself in it. My project allowed me to engage the community and work toward change. I do not see myself as a researcher, but as a partner of New Leaf Services, working together toward our shared goal of increasing access to transportation and, consequently, improving people's lives.

Through CBR, we worked *with* communities rather than just serving them. Waldref describes how she came to see the merging of herself as a university student and community member:

My year working with the Washington Interfaith Network was an incredible learning experience that provided me with a better understanding of the research process, as well as the benefits of community organizing. Most exciting, this work extends beyond the realm of a static paper between my professor and me, and holds the potential to create real change in my community. Realizing that I can do social justice work through academic research is empowering to me as a student, and opens my eyes to how activism and academics can be powerfully connected.

### *Greater Understanding of Social Problems*

Through repeated, firsthand observation of programs, we gained a direct understanding of social problems and a greater recognition of community needs. Community partners were invaluable in elucidating the concrete issues plaguing their respective communities. Willis explains:

My research experience with Turning the Page and hundreds of public school children and their families has made me even more attuned to the issues that so many children face in the classroom each and every day. I have come to value literacy and its effect on a population. As a change to my more internal thoughts and actions toward others, I have become more sympathetic and aware of issues surrounding the public education system, specifically concerning residents in the District of Columbia. Also, I have been moved more than once to speak up about issues of education in public forums offered by the District's local govern-

ment entities. I have been more aware of my activities as a volunteer tutor, including how I approach a relationship with a child, what material I present to them, and how I engage their learning of writing and reading. After hearing about the lack of materials in a child's home from their parents, I have become more aware of the living situations from which many children come.

Similarly, Peresie's research helped her to more fully understand poverty's impact in Atlanta and the extent to which transportation was the "missing puzzle piece," necessary in ameliorating poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and poor educational opportunities.

### *Integration of Academics and Service*

As a complement to greater self-understanding, and an understanding of our environments, we enhanced our dedication to working within our communities. Each of us was previously passionate about community service, serving in various volunteer capacities, including tutoring and social justice work. As undergraduates at premier research institutions, we had all conducted independent research through our regular coursework. Our involvement in CBR, however, marked the first time we successfully integrated academics and our interest in service. By developing our skills through research, the benefits to us eclipsed those provided through traditional service-learning. Peresie elaborates:

Service-learning is about getting out in the community and working and learning at the same time. What we did involved much more of a synthesis. It was simultaneously service-learning, community and partnership building, and product creating. We had to work together to produce research of long-term value to our organizations.

At various points, our experiences moved us to frustration, anger, sadness, and grief. Unlike traditional academic courses where we read books, wrote papers, and took tests—all fairly emotion-neutral activities—CBR was emotional, connecting our minds and hearts. We have come to appreciate the power of understanding and passion. By combining academics and service through CBR, we developed the desire and ability to address community issues in a systematic and effective manner.

### *Conclusion*

To fully understand all facets of CBR, one must examine the practice from all perspectives of all parties. As students who are all at once practition-

ers, learners, and teachers, the four of us have sought to communicate a previously undocumented perspective, one that offers a direct view of the CBR experience and its impact on students.

We end with two final thoughts on the undergraduate role in conducting CBR. First, this article speaks to the powerful social and personal change involvement in CBR can stimulate for students. The issues raised in this article add yet another angle from which to assess the effectiveness and impact this work has on communities and its members.

Second, we provide recommendations for future inquiry into the effects of CBR on the university and community. We hope that practitioners can use this article as scaffolding for future analysis of CBR's effects on students' knowledge construction, personal and interpersonal development, and civic participation. The commonalities identified from our experiences can serve as reference points for building knowledge about the usefulness of CBR to undergraduates and communities.

Furthermore, as we strive for a better understanding and practice of CBR, we hope to see more of the community members' perspective in future literature. Clearly, CBR is not merely about improving undergraduate education, but also conditions in our communities. Therefore, it is imperative that we provide the means for the community partners' voices to be heard.

As CBR gains greater prominence, our experiences offer a springboard for further examination of the effects of CBR on its various constituencies. Practitioners must begin asking hard questions—questions that open others' minds to this work, expand the possibilities for communities, and, ultimately create mechanisms in every neighborhood to facilitate real and much-needed change.

#### Note

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