As social work doctoral students at the University of Pennsylvania, the authors developed the service-learning course in this paper with funding from a W.K. Kellogg grant through the University Center for Community Partnerships as part of their effort to incorporate academically-based community service classes into University curriculum. We decided to focus on developing safe havens for youth as projects for this course. The students were undergraduates from various disciplines and Masters’ students from the School of Social Work. These students teamed with congregational leaders, community members, and neighborhood youth to define the nature of their partnership, identify youth assets and needs, and to lay the groundwork for a mutually beneficial relationship. Project background, course development, and learning outcomes are discussed.

Academically-Based Service-Learning

Our course was one of several service-learning courses offered at the University of Pennsylvania. Ira Harkavy, director of the Center for Community Partnership, has long been a champion of academically-based service-learning, carefully distinguishing his approach from a traditional approach to service-learning, which he considers exploitive of the community. Harkavy uses John Dewey’s theory of instrumental intelligence as a starting point for his own vision of academically-based community service. He believes, as does Dewey, that “genuine learning only occurs when human beings focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving genuine ‘dilemmas’ and ‘perplexities,’” and that all reflection on challenging issues should lead to active solutions to those issues (Harkavy, 1996). Like Harkavy and many other proponents of service-learning, we believe that this type of learning enhances academic performance, increases student understanding of an increasingly complex world, and discourages students from formulating and acting on easy ideologies.

We believe that academic courses involving community partnerships such as ours might bridge the perceived conflict between experiential learning and traditional classroom learning. We planned to integrate the two types of learning through participatory action research, hoping the hybrid would provide students the best of both worlds.

Participatory Action Research

We chose participatory action research (PAR) as a method for course development, implementation, and evaluation because it is a “form of social research which combines research with intervention. It is characterized by a collaborative relationship between the researcher and a client organization that is in an immediate problematic situation” (Cohen, 1998). PAR is particularly useful for marginalized people because it avoids the traditional expert/client dichotomy that devalues and reduces people to mere research subjects (Tewey, 1997). In addition, this approach seeks to balance the unequal power inherent in dominant research design and application, which often perpetuates dependence on those with access to resources (Heron, 1981). PAR is rarely taught in research classes, but is the method we believed would best facilitate community partnership and learning from the community.

The social research most students have been exposed to is based on empirical-analytical inquiry guided by the researcher. Positivistic science assumes that problems can be measured as a system of distinct, observable variables. This method yields a specific type of data that has utility in describing,
explaining, and predicting relationships that can be operationally defined. However, the reality of these problems takes place within the context of a complex and interactive world. It is important to remember that when problems are reduced to manageable units they are often severed from their real world connections (Pieper, 1985).

The complexity of real life problems requires varied and multiple methods (Aguinis, 1993). Social research requires more participation of the practitioners and the client in defining the problem and research question. This focus on client participation gives both researcher and client an opportunity to discover first-hand the client’s problem, the resistance to change, and the possibilities for change (Dore, 1990). By each contributing their unique knowledge and experience, researcher and client create a collective version of the problem and solutions (Stringer, 1996). Action researchers must be willing to adapt to changing circumstances, revise plans accordingly, and allow research questions to emerge as the collaborators explore the problems. There are limitations to the action research method, however. It is not always the case that client or client system is willing or able to engage in such a process at the time the problem seems most critical. The researcher is left to explore and negotiate the limits of the client-researcher knowledge building process. The benefits of this process are that, through this relationship, the client’s request for help is honored and the researcher gains new knowledge.

We recognized possible difficulties teaching students action research methods that appeared in opposition with positivist scientific principles with which they were most familiar. We wanted, however, to use PAR to expose students to community residents’ perspectives and create a collaborative project with community coalitions and congregations. In addition, we believed using PAR would facilitate changing the nature of the researcher-participant relationship and lead to solutions addressing the real problems in the community. Shifting from a positivist research frame to PAR was difficult for teachers, students, and even community participants. All participants had to give up a way of knowing that was familiar, well accepted, and proven to yield some results, to a more fluid and uncertain process. Accomplishing this shift to reconceptualize research is made more difficult by the lack of senior faculty trained in PAR methods and continued resistance on the part of positivist-trained social scientists.

In developing the course prior to it being offered to students, our first action research steps were attending several community meetings, having a series of conversations with community leaders, and conducting focus groups with various community youth. Through this process we came to understand that addressing issues of youth safety and violence would provide a common ground for all possible partners. In dialogue with community members, it was mutually decided that course projects would focus on developing safe havens for youth. We also came to more deeply understand faith-based organizations’ historical and contemporary importance in this local community’s social network. The two possible community collaborators that emerged were both leaders from black churches.

**Black Churches as Community Partners**

Black churches have a significant tradition of sustaining and serving the community. From the slave era to the present, black churches provided for the social, psychological, and economic — as well as the spiritual — welfare of their members (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). While Christian religious instruction for slaves was popularized as away to control and shape the emotional content of black spiritual practices, it was also retooled to provide a sense of agency and purpose for blacks (Wilmore & Cone, 1974). Black churches were sought as places to foster unity and affirm identity. Striving for solidarity and liberation gave way to survival strategies and service to their community. Perhaps the greatest benefit of African-Americans’ Christianization was that it led to the creation of separate and independent black churches that addressed the unique needs of both enslaved and free blacks. Black churches also developed the impetus toward social action and social change best known through the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Since that time, black churches have become more visible as active participants and collaborators in urban renewal, black business enterprises, economic redevelopment, and housing development (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Tapia, 1996). Although there is ongoing debate as to whether black churches remain central neighborhood institutions, we found in our effort to build community relationships that it was the black church leaders who were willing to consider partnering with a group from the University of Pennsylvania.

We were quite aware of the asset that congregations represented in urban communities in general, and in West Philadelphia in particular. Recent research documented that local congregations provided an impressive array of social services (Chaves, 1999; Cnaan, 1997; Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 1999). Cnaan’s research on urban congregations’ social and community involvement found that of the 111 congregations surveyed, 93% were involved in providing at least one social service to their community and 46% provided some type of youth program. We also discovered from local directories and the
yellow pages approximately 321 congregations in our geographic community. These findings suggested congregations were one of the most prevalent community-based organizations and were likely to provide some type of youth program. Hence, congregations were the most likely partners for sustainable and community-sponsored initiatives.

Black churches we encountered had strong community-oriented missions, institutional resources, and the collective will to address their community’s social and economic needs. However, the efforts of local congregations and community organizations were often isolated, resulting in duplication and/or fragmentation of services. We also found that public and other private services were limited, and existing programs were unaware of where to turn for similar community resources. We came to believe that partnering with black congregations and community organizations would be the best way to become familiar with community needs and concerns, and to coordinate community resources.

Our next action step was to identify two black congregations committed to tackling violence and youth safety problems. Getting to know leaders from these congregations increased our confidence that black churches were strong organizations for developing community partnerships and working with youth. Concurrently, we acknowledged difficulties: a class from the University of Pennsylvania might be viewed with suspicion, or, expected to be the panacea. Although the Center for Community Partnerships at Penn has been instrumental in facilitating community partnerships, numerous community members, religious or otherwise, are not particularly aware of this fact. The success of partnerships between the Center and community organizations has not changed the power imbalance created by an affluent University taking action in a low-income and predominately African American community. To begin shifting the imbalance, we adopted a strengths-based perspective, encouraging all participants to recognize and honor their strengths equally. This presented another challenge for participants: students had to give up their position of privilege and role as experts, while community residents had to forgo their role as victim and need for Penn to solve all community problems.

Development of the Course

The original impetus for developing the course came from a conversation with a community pastor who organized the Coalition for Everyday People (COEP), a consciousness-raising group that grew out of his community church. The pastor described his community as living in the shadow of the University. From his perspective, the community was struggling and the University should help. His request led to our original set of questions: What could our service-learning students do to help and also honor their academic commitments? What were the existing resources and deficiencies? And what communities were we talking about?

Our next action step was to identify target neighborhoods and community stakeholders with needs that might be addressed through partnership with the University. To identify our target areas, we used Geographical Information Software (GIS) to map resources that might later be used for service planning, evaluation, and integration for community partners and development (for more information on GIS applications, see the Cartographic Modeling Lab at http://apollo.gsfa.upenn.edu/). Through asset mapping we tried to identify neighborhoods with potential for partnerships that were close to the University. Seven neighborhoods were ultimately identified, as well as community organizations in the target area of the coalition. We then identified congregations within the same geographic area as potential partners for delivering social services to neighborhood youth. Congregations represented a significant presence, with 321 places of worship from various faiths.

We found that community organizations often overlapped spatially with congregations. It was unclear from the mapping whether these organizations had any other connection. What was clear was need for youth services, apparent in a spatial comparison of under-18 youth density and the recreational facilities available to them. Asset mapping led to our next question: Could forging partnerships between congregations and community organizations increase youth-based services? Mapping the neighborhoods not only allowed us to identify potential youth service delivery partners, but also indicated which organizations identified themselves as youth-serving organizations.

Identifying the Stakeholders

The Coalition for Everyday People (COEP) became our first stakeholder. COEP purported to operate as an umbrella for over 20 participating West Philadelphia organizations including social service providers, businesses, faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations, and local congregations. The coalition was established to respond to violent crime in the West Philadelphia community and develop strategies to bring Penn and the community together to collectively address community problems. The coalition was particularly interested in how these issues impact youth.

During the course of coalition meetings, it became clear that COEP’s idea of partnership relied on a tra-
traditional model of resource provision by an outside entity to a resource-needy community. COEP viewed Penn as an affluent neighbor that continues to thrive and expand its borders at the expense of the West Philadelphia residents. Consequently, COEP’s main objective in forging a partnership was accessing Penn’s resources, rather than creating an egalitarian relationship based on community empowerment and youth leadership development that could lead to an exchange of resources. We recognized that this resource provision model would reinforce negative assumptions that inner-city communities are inherently deficient, need outside experts, and can attract resources only by identifying large, often intractable problems that are best solved through interventions emphasizing hierarchical power differentials. With different views on partnerships, we found it difficult to move the partnership with COEP to a planning stage. Our next action step was expanding our efforts and engaging other stakeholders in the community through the scientific research technique of “snowball sampling.”

**Enlarging Our Scope**

Snowball sampling is used when participants in a research project are difficult to recruit. This sampling method asks one participant to identify one or more other possible participants, who in turn identify additional participants. Our work with COEP led us to the Neighborhood Development Project, directed by outreach specialist Rod Chavis and sponsored by the Lutheran Children and Family Service. Although he was initially critical of Penn’s use of West Philadelphia issues to promote its own agenda, our meetings with Chavis were mutually beneficial. Mr. Chavis’ organization did not actually become a participant in our project, but we maintained contact throughout the semester. He became a valued contributor to the process, joining us on more than one occasion for class discussions.

Our preliminary meetings with community organizations introduced us to the Center for Urban Resources. Our next meeting was with Sharon Fleishman, director of the Center’s Philadelphia Project for Youth Ministry. She helped us contact existing youth ministries, one of which hosted a focus group of young people from Freedom Bible Church. Youth participants indicated an overwhelming desire for structured activities monitored by caring adults. For these youth, safety seemed to be embodied in relationships that brought order and hope to their lives. Their church represented a safe haven from the drugs, violence, and negative peer pressure encountered on a daily basis. Ultimately we did not partner with Freedom Bible Church, but the focus group with these young people convinced us that youth were essential collaborators in this process. We took another action step in actively soliciting partnership with a youth-focused congregation.

**Another Faith-Based Partner**

Through contacts at a community meeting on programs for adjudicated youth, we initiated a relationship with a leader from Bible Way Baptist Church. This church was thriving, with a young pastor and a membership largely drawn from the local West Philadelphia community. This concentration of church members from within their own community is somewhat unusual and led to the development of a particularly dynamic vision for urban ministry. The vision originally addressed issues of youth incarceration, youth homicide, and drug trafficking, but later came to include a focus on welfare-to-work opportunities. The Bible Way Baptist Church saw itself as the anchor for a citywide faith-based initiative. Working with Penn would be one of their first steps toward accomplishing this goal. Mr. Bennie Swans, a prominent and charismatic leader, was the representative for Bible Way. He became an active participant and attracted other congregation and community members to participate in course projects.

**Final Touches to Course Design**

From summer of 1998 through spring of 1999, we continued using PAR to meet with various members of the Penn community and local religious leaders, attended neighborhood association meetings, and held focus groups with neighborhood youth. We developed a basic idea of topics for the course, how to create opportunities to bring students and community participants together, and how action research could be used to identify community issues and assets through dialogue among the partners.

**Course Implementation**

The course was finalized and implemented in Spring, 1999. Our service-learning course attracted University undergraduates from various disciplines and MSW students from the School of Social Work. Class participants were diverse by gender, age, and academic level, but homogenous in experiences with community organizing and affiliations with faith-based organizations. We conducted the class as an open forum, inviting speakers to lecture on community organizing, African-American urban social ministry, social work with adolescents, and PAR. We also invited the congregation and community members we met during our course development to participate in class discussions about possible partner-
ship projects with the students. We provided opportunities in class and through journal writing for students to process and share their learning.

When asked in the first class session how they viewed the West Philadelphia community, most students admitted their impressions had been shaped by negative stereotypes, and that Penn’s student orientation process had reinforced these images. This was not surprising, given the historic relationship between the University and the surrounding community, which might best be described as antagonistic. But the students chose the class despite being warned against interaction with the world outside Penn’s security parameters; they came to learn and be changed by that learning. The students submitted journals every three weeks and we found they were most comfortable with guest speakers representing the academic world. They were most uncomfortable with the action research method for developing partnership projects. Although students enjoyed meeting community members and discussing how they might partner on projects to address issues of mutual concern, the collaborative and incremental nature of action research made progress toward a concrete plan of action seem slow, circular, and somewhat amorphous. We addressed student frustrations collectively in class and individually when requested.

Two class meetings in particular galvanized the process toward forming a partnership. Mr. Swans, from Bible Way Baptist Church, presented his faith-based initiative by outlining a series of options for our participation including: community asset mapping, facilitating a media campaign against violence, establishing a program for adjudicated youth, and organizing a soup kitchen. His view of partnership came from a deficit perspective, seeing the University of Pennsylvania as having unlimited resources and an obligation to dispense them to the community. He did not see partnership between Penn and the community as a mutually derived and supported exchange, but as an inherently unequal relationship demanding aggressive community action to access Penn resources. His view, although understandable given Penn’s tendency to shortchange the surrounding community, was not one that had ever produced any long-lasting community results. We hoped to modify his view slightly, enabling us to enter into a partnership built on an awareness of community strengths.

Mr. Swans presented himself and his plans in such a zealous manner that he left little room for input from the students or from us as course facilitators. Mr. Swans’ maverick style seemed at odds with his stature as a religious lay leader, and his partnership plans were too large to be encompassed by any one project. His aggressive style also challenged students on how to create a mutually beneficial partnership with him.

Mr. Swans’ goals and objectives gave us a starting point for subsequent negotiations. However, it was COEP’s Pastor Falcon who reached the students through a heartfelt explanation of his own history and the history of his community. He opened the door to get to know him and youth from his congregation and community. The students began to see possibilities in partnering with both of these congregations once they developed a connection with the people, their concerns, and their hopes. Although their styles were dramatically different, Pastor Falcon and Mr. Swans agreed that problems facing neighborhood youth were of primary importance. The class meetings and discussions led to an agreement between the students and community leaders to establish work groups consisting of a congregation member, a community member, a project team member from our class, and as many young people as possible (see Figure 1). The work groups were to assess the real needs and resources of the neighborhoods and build upon the previous work of the community leaders, course developers, and students to create safe havens for youth.

![FIGURE 1 Project Flow Chart](image-url)
Partnership Development

Class meetings were initially held on Penn’s campus and discussions centered on efforts made by faith-based organizations and neighborhood associations to rebuild the surrounding communities. The class later met in the community as well, where students began a dialogue with community and congregation members around issues of mutual concern and suggested collaborations that might benefit both. The meetings ended by establishing the first work group and agreeing for that group to meet the following week.

At the first work group meeting, participants discussed the idea of safe havens and how we might move toward their creation within the context of the community and with the help of the church. It was agreed that the first step would be to get input from the young people in the community by hosting a youth forum at Bible Way so that youth could speak on their own behalf. Pastor Falcon agreed to participate in the forum and bring youth from his neighborhood. The decision to hold the youth forum was a good example of action research at work in that it was the result of negotiation among all the stakeholders and led directly to more stakeholders, the youth themselves. Students were able to learn and articulate that the somewhat laborious process they had engaged in to get to this point was worth the effort because everyone participated in the process and felt a sense of ownership in the project.

In negotiating the division of labor required to produce the forum, the project team agreed to do the administrative work and Mr. Swans agreed to use his community contacts to recruit young people for the youth forum. Although over 20 letters were mailed to churches and neighborhood associations with the expectation that the community relationships of Bible Way would ensure participation of neighborhood youth, the youth forum was attended by only nine neighborhood youth, along with the project team, Mr. Swans, and Pastor Falcon. While the low attendance was initially disappointing, the youth that were present articulated the issues and concerns in their community: violence, drugs, peer pressure, and the lack of recreation and adult supervision. The turning point of the forum was one youth’s story of his brother’s murder. We had all seen news reports of black youth killed in urban areas, but this young man called our attention to the fact that while his brother’s death was a great loss, an even more alarming fact was that his brother’s life was not valued. The murderer went free, leading him to question the value of a young black life. He reminded us that he shared the same hopes as everyone in the room but feared that his fate might be similar to his brother’s because even the son of Bill Cosby could not escape this fate.

The narrative gave a face to the problem of violence in many young people’s lives and solidified the service partnership’s purpose for the course—creating safe havens. Most of the youth voiced their opinion that part of the problem was having nowhere to come to talk about their problems. One young person said she had not previously thought of the church as a place for this kind of discussion. They all expressed a desire to have another youth forum. We agreed to plan another forum within a month and the project team invited the youth to attend our next class at the University. Three young people did attend the class and provided the core for the next youth forum.

The second youth forum was held at Pastor Falcon’s Covenant Community Church. This forum was better attended by youth and was also attended by one parent. We were conscious of hearing a great deal from the youth at the last forum about the negative aspects of life in their communities. Wanting to honor our commitment to a strengths-based perspective, we started the second forum with the question: What are you most proud of about yourself and your community? The answers highlighted the importance of family, school, and community relationships. They also highlighted the importance of a church like Covenant Community. In the words of one young person, “Pastor Larry brings the church to us.” The result of this kind of outreach was apparent; only one of the young people at the forum was actually a member of the church, yet all of them felt comfortable enough in the setting to discuss issues that were important to them. Unlike the first forum, there was no sustained narrative of a particular event, but rather a broad discussion of the reasons why young people engage in risky behavior and alternatives to this behavior. The young people also felt comfortable enough to end the forum with a series of lighthearted and funny interactions, as well as a lively picture-taking session.

The project team came away from both youth forums realizing that safe havens need to include both a place for serious discussion and spontaneous play. We witnessed the youth forums as safe havens situated in a church that seemed able to accommodate both the most troubling concerns of the youth and their need to be children.

Discussion

By some standards the youth forums were not successful; they never really led to the kind of partnerships we had envisioned, although later we discovered that they created a foundation for developing an after school program supported by Penn students at Pastor Falcon’s church. The class partici-
pants, in collaboration with Pastor Falcon and Mr. Swans, created an environment that allowed neighborhood youth to tell their stories and begin to see their survival as their strength. The sense of worth and worthiness expressed by these young people at both of the forums went beyond anything the University alone could provide. It seemed to the class that after the forums, the community’s demand for Penn’s help had a context. The young people conveyed their daily struggles to escape the violence and drugs in their schools and neighborhood. These young people and those that cared about them expressed feelings of being trapped and only able to survive. This explained the survival strategies and paternalistic partnering that Pastor Falcon and Mr. Swans seemed to seek from Penn.

The Penn students also changed in the process of negotiating a partnership. They now had faces and real lives to counteract their former images of West Philadelphia. These negative images previously kept the students at a distance, but the course allowed them to face their stereotypes, fears, and prejudices. The course also taught the students the damage that could be done by simply giving people help without recognizing their existing resources, their need to create their own solutions, and their need to ask for help in their own way. To become partners with the community, however limited that partnership was, the students had to learn to hear and speak a language not their own. The Penn students spoke a language of privilege while the community members spoke a language of need; Penn students felt entitled to success, while community members felt entitled to resources appropriated by Penn that once belonged to the community. Becoming partners meant recognizing the meaning of this language and finding a purpose that could be expressed through it. The success of the course was in the participants’ ability to learn from one another and to work toward a mutual goal.

The students also learned that to become partners required offering your presence. The students spent time with the young people beyond the project and in ways the young people requested. For example, the students took one young man out to dinner and other youth on a campus tour. The students recognized that being able to enter the space and spirit of the community was a valuable gift from the young people and those that cared about them. The Penn students also changed in the process of negotiating a partnership. They now had faces and real lives to counteract their former images of West Philadelphia. These negative images previously kept the students at a distance, but the course allowed them to face their stereotypes, fears, and prejudices. The course also taught the students the damage that could be done by simply giving people help without recognizing their existing resources, their need to create their own solutions, and their need to ask for help in their own way. To become partners with the community, however limited that partnership was, the students had to learn to hear and speak a language not their own. The Penn students spoke a language of privilege while the community members spoke a language of need; Penn students felt entitled to success, while community members felt entitled to resources appropriated by Penn that once belonged to the community. Becoming partners meant recognizing the meaning of this language and finding a purpose that could be expressed through it. The success of the course was in the participants’ ability to learn from one another and to work toward a mutual goal.

The students also learned that to become partners required offering your presence. The students spent time with the young people beyond the project and in ways the young people requested. For example, the students took one young man out to dinner and other youth on a campus tour. The students recognized that being able to enter the space and spirit of the community was a valuable gift from the young people. As a class, we did not create a program or write a grant, but we did share in renewing the spirit of two congregational leaders and their community youth. The young people left the youth forums knowing that there are other young people and adults who want to share in their vision of a safer community. Through the use of PAR, our class participated in planting the seeds for a safe haven with these young people, although it will take a lot more effort for this haven to appear on community asset maps. This course’s greatest service was bringing together unlikely partners — university, community organizations, congregations, and youth — to address violence and youth safety.

Unfortunately, for all of us, this course was supported financially and academically for only one semester. Although we tried to integrate the course into the School of Social Work’s curriculum, we were unsuccessful. This indicated to us that, to some degree, lip-service was being paid to the idea of experiential, community-based learning without a correlative commitment to ongoing community change. We envisioned the project as one that, over time, might produce significant change. We intended to have new student groups participate every semester, giving us the peoplepower to enlarge the scope of our efforts while providing increasingly better focused and deeper learning experiences. We were aware that our status as doctoral students was perhaps a handicap, but as mentioned earlier, there is a shortage of trained and committed senior faculty to support the kind of work we wanted to do.

References


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