Seven years ago, Hamilton, NY was a struggling rural community. Downtown storefronts were empty. Village buildings’ second and third floors had boarded up windows. The village green was in a state of disarray with dilapidated sidewalks and a crumbling fountain. There was a general sense that the community was dying.

Over the last seven years, Hamilton has become a vibrant rural community. Storefronts are filled with stable businesses. Façades have received coordinated improvements, including new windows. Businesses and offices now occupy village buildings’ second and third floors. The village green has been completely renovated and sits next to a $750,000 public library expansion. Small micro-businesses are growing due to a new technical assistance program. A new business park has three tenants. The community feels alive, as evidenced by a range of new community organizations including a land trust and a community center for teenagers.

A unique partnership between Colgate University and the Town and Village of Hamilton has driven this transformation. At the core of the partnership lies a series of community-based research projects carried out by students in sociology, geography, anthropology, and economics students.

The case of Colgate University is used to argue that community-based research can be a vibrant and effective form of service-learning, especially in rural communities. However, community-based research is difficult to execute well. There is little flexibility and high consequences for failed projects. As such, community-based research requires negotiation at multiple levels and developing a set of principles to guide decision-making and project development.

Liberal Arts Colleges, Rural Community Development, and Community-Based Research

Like many colleges, Colgate is struggling to find ways to generate local economic development. Depressed communities pose a range of vexing problems for colleges (Channels & Zannoni, 1999; Edwards & Marullo, 1999; Forrant & Silka, 1999). It is expensive and difficult to run a college in a depressed community (Weinberg, 2002). Furthermore, depressed communities raise a series of ethical and moral questions for universities. Clearly, institutions of higher education have an ethical responsibility to local communities (Boyte & Kari, 1997), but we often struggle over the extent and proper content of the obligation (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997; Shefner & Cobb, 2002). In the last decade an emerging literature has explored campus-community partnerships. Part of the literature has focused on how campus-community partnerships can generate community development (Loker & Montanero-Vargas, 2002; Nyden et al.; Shefner & Cobb). The literature has also examined campus-community partnerships’ academic component, exploring service-learning and other pedagogical models for re-igniting the values of citizenship within students (Boyte & Kari, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1997; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).

Within liberal arts colleges, there has been a growing interest in campus-community partnerships (Weinberg, 2002). Developing the academic component has been straightforward, although not easy or linear (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Stanton, Giles,
& Cruz, 1999). The more difficult part has been how to generate community development (Carson, 2001; Forrant & Silk, 1999). Liberal arts colleges generally lack the graduate students and/or large research departments (e.g., engineering, computer science, biology) needed to generate the sort of growth of an Austin, Texas or a Boulder, Colorado. However, we are well versed at producing undergraduates who have the intellectual skills to engage in good basic research, especially in the social sciences where students often take a research methods course and have a research oriented capstone experience (Channels & Zannoni, 1999). These students have the skills and opportunities to do surveys, focus groups, asset mapping, and qualitative interviewing. Thus community-based research matches our students’ skill sets and opportunity structures.

Community-based research also appears to meet struggling rural communities’ challenges and needs. In general, rural communities lack the capacity for development (Flora & Flora, 1997; Weinberg, 2000). There are few non-profit organizations. Local government is often volunteer-based. There are generally fewer local foundations. Furthermore, there is tremendous ambivalence about development (Ramsay, 1996; Salant & Marx, 1995). Partially, this apprehension comes from prior dysfunctional development patterns, including natural resource extraction, industrial waste facilities, low road industry, tourism, and prisons. These bring economic growth, but not without social and ecological disruption (Audriac, 1997). The apprehension also arises from rural residents’ desire for economic growth without significant social change. Thus, a major study by the Aspen Institute concluded that rural residents “have no desire to turn their communities into small cities. They want to preserve the culture, values and way of life that make rural places so special” (Salant & Marx, 1995, p. 20).

As a response, many communities have embraced models of sustainable community development (Green, 1997). Sustainable community development refers to practices that simultaneously create economic vitality, environmental stewardship, and social equity (Audriac, 1997). Although the concept of sustainable development is subject to varying definitions, using the phrase suggests forms of economic vitality that focus on the people already living within the community and quality of life for current and future community members (Weinberg, 1999). As opposed to traditional forms of economic development, sustainable community development focuses more on development through enhancing local resources. The concept of sustainable community development also suggests a political project of connecting development to the empowerment of rural communities. Thus, strategies include micro-enterprise programs and “buy local” campaigns with less emphasis on tax incentives and other business/people recruitment programs (Green, 1997; Weinberg).

There is tremendous synergy between the mission and skills of liberal arts colleges and the needs of rural communities who are attempting sustainable community development projects. Since the community seeks to control the development process by locating assets and opportunities, sustainable development projects often require that the community do basic research. Often, communities find that the research needs far exceed their capacity in terms of both time and skills. Research done in conjunction with students is one viable model for meeting this need. It allows communities to partake in the research without being overwhelmed by it (Strand, 2000).

To make this clear, the case of Colgate University and Hamilton, NY is used to document the ways community-based research can enhance efforts at sustainable community development. I focus on our efforts to work with the community to develop a small business development project called Life’s Work.

First Stage: The Partnership Is Born

In the summer of 1997, Colgate University became involved in a project run by the Madison County Industrial Development Agency (IDA) called the Hamlets of Madison County Initiative (Weinberg, 1999). The Hamlets project was engaging small rural communities (population under 1,000) in the Central New York region in community visioning exercises. Community visioning is a technique for community-controlled development. Through a series of town meetings a community maps its assets, conducts best practice research, and then uses the assets to assess the feasibility and desirability of different development strategies (Ayres, Cole, Hein, Huntington, & Kobberdahl, 1990; Walzer, 1996). The end result is an articulated community-controlled plan for development.

The IDA chose this approach to get beyond local residents’ skepticism about development. The skepticism arose from a sense that outsiders, mainly urban professionals, would force their development vision onto the community. There was a secondary feeling that a planning document would be, to quote one individual “another expensive book end in the Town office.” Initially, the IDA was hampered by a lack of knowledge regarding the community controlled development process. They had solicited the help of two Colgate University profes-
Weinberg

sors, a sociologist (myself), and an economist. We spent a summer supervising an economics undergraduate student who researched the feasibility for community-controlled development in Madison County.

In essence, the student spent ten weeks doing fieldwork in local communities to attempt a very crude asset map, while also assessing local residents’ willingness to get involved in development efforts. An original attempt by another professor had been unsuccessful, because he talked over residents’ heads who already came into the conversations distrusting Colgate’s involvement. The student, however, was successful. She was non-threatening. As one resident summarized, “I talked to her because she seemed really naive and I want to educate her about the area.”

We drew three findings from the student’s research project: (1) there were assets in the community, especially some small locally-owned businesses; (2) local residents were skeptical about development; most people believed that scarce resources would be spent on small gains, other residents worried that gains would negatively change the community’s character; and (3) there was concern that Colgate’s involvement had a hidden agenda. This last concern seemed to dissipate when it was framed as student research, as opposed to Colgate’s interest in community development.

Based on her research, we developed a community visioning process. Each community would form a local steering committee that would organize three community meetings. Each meeting would entail a series of small group visioning exercises. Together the exercises would address three broad questions: what is our community like, what would we like our community to be like in 10 years, and what resources do we have to get us from where we are to where we want to be? The visioning exercises started in the fall of 1997. Students enrolled in a sociology class on community development ran the sessions. The class was divided into four groups. Each group was assigned to a community to help plan and run the visioning exercises.

As the students were doing the projects, they were also taking my standard community development course. The class entails reading a series of books on the social, political, and economic challenges to community development. The course ends with a series of readings on new forums and strategies for development. Community-controlled development was one of the techniques we explored as a best practice. In addition to reading the books, students attended three, 50-minute class sessions per week. The projects were woven into the class sessions. We used the communities and projects as a backdrop to talk about issues and theories from the readings. We also used the projects as data for the students’ final papers, in which they were asked to draw upon the projects and course readings to assess the effectiveness of community-controlled development as a strategy.

As might be expected, the first time through the course was full of surprises. The original intent had been for the students to organize the meetings. It quickly became apparent that organizing the sessions required research that was beyond the community’s capacity. Students filled the research void. They did routine local research, such as putting together comprehensive lists of formal and informal social groups who needed to be invited. They also did more difficult research. For example, the visioning exercises required data on economic infrastructure, including information on local schools, banking programs, and housing stock.

The community steering committees could not do the research. Working multiple part-time jobs, people simply lacked the time. They also lacked the basic research skills. Furthermore, the idea of having to do extensive research exacerbated community members’ apprehension in themselves and the community-based planning process.

During the community visioning meetings, students continued to provide research support. Sticking to the community-based research principles, the students worked with the community in designing and conducting research. Thus, students did the work, but the process was driven by the community who identified needs and oversaw the work. Hence, the research process democratized the production of local knowledge (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Strand, 2000). The process was straightforward. Typically, a group of community members would raise an issue during a small group exercise about a hidden asset. They would ask the students to collect some data to see if the asset really existed in the community. If the asset seemed to exist, they would also ask students to conduct best practice research to suggest ways the community might be able to leverage the asset for development purposes.

As we got into the sessions, the issue of small businesses emerged time and time again as an under-utilized asset. For example, one night community members in Stockbridge (a small rural hamlet) started talking about local home-based businesses. This was exciting because people generally complained that there were no businesses in Stockbridge. They asked students to map local businesses. Over the next week, students worked through local data sources to generate a list of 45
local businesses. The students also did some very basic research on rural home-based business programs. At the next meeting, they presented the research.

Despite the community project success, there were a number of classroom problems. Of the four communities involved in the visioning exercises, two never got organized enough to do the exercises. Therefore, the students assigned to these projects had very little to do. Second, while most of the students did a great job with the exercises, some lacked the public speaking/facilitation skills. They mostly sat while other students ran the visioning exercises. Finally, there was far less flexibility than I was accustomed to with other service-learning classes. The community sessions were a set time. Students could not miss the sessions. Unlike a school or shelter, there were not opportunities at other times for students to make up the service work. Furthermore, the community depended upon them to run the exercises.

Still, the course was generally a success. The quality of student papers and classroom discussion was higher than previous renditions of the course. Likewise, students remarked on the formal course evaluations that they gained a lot from the course when compared to other Colgate classes. Across the board, students attributed the increased learning to the projects. The students with failed projects were frustrated and felt let down, but they wrote about the sources of failure. They juxtaposed their experiences against their classmates. This level of comparison generated great classroom conversation, although a few students used the course evaluations to comment on the unfairness of being assigned to a failed project, even if they learned from the failure.

Toward the semester end, the IDA asked me to expand the project the following term into new communities including an effort in Hamilton by a Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC). The LRPC had been attempting a community-based planning process in Hamilton for three years. They had taken a community-based approach for similar reasons as the IDA. As one individual stated, “Somebody else (an outsider) would hand us a plan that we could never use because it does not fit our sense for what we want and we don’t have the resources to act on the suggestions anyway.”

Initially, the LRPC lacked the knowledge on how to complete community-based planning. After struggling for two years, they hired a consultant. The consultant was able to outline a process, but the research needs were beyond the committee’s capacity. Our work with the Hamlets project was covered almost weekly in the local paper. The LRPC asked us to help them during the spring 1998 semester. With some knowledge about the LRPC, results from our community visioning exercises, and a sense for the pitfalls, a group of students from the fall term and I designed a group independent study where the students completed three pieces of research: a consumer behavior study of Colgate students, a survey of dairy farmers, and a project that examined why students did not go into the local village very often.

This time, I decided to hedge my bets. The research projects were to be completed independent of the community group. While we would research for the community group, the project would not depend upon the community group itself. Two of the projects worked extremely well. Students did a wonderful survey, which found that Colgate students spent about $500,000 during the academic year on presents. Approximately 75 percent of what they purchased could be bought locally, but less than 2 percent was actually bought in the village. The second group found that students did not travel into the village to purchase products because there was not enough to do there. Consumption was a social activity. Students wanted “to blow off steam.” There had to be 2-3 hours of shopping, eating, or movie watching activities. Hamilton lacked this breadth of options.

The students surveying the dairy farmers found interesting information suggesting that most farmers had no plans to pass the farms to their children. This was important to the LRPC because it shifted the debate from saving dairy farming over the long-term to helping save dairy operations in the short-term. It also contributed to a growing sense that the future laid within local entrepreneurial business development, not agriculture.

While the projects were more successful than the fall semester’s, the students’ experiences were less educational. The students had very little interaction with the community. During the fall semester, most of the learning came from community interaction. The research was the mechanism for the interaction. This time, the research was designed to minimize interaction. Thus, I had succeeded in protecting the students from the ebb and flow of community groups, which negatively affected the projects during the first semester. In doing so, I reduced the educational impact that came from interacting with the community group, as well as doing the research project. In addition, I often got in the way. Trying to relay information between the community groups and the students, I replicated all of the problems associated with the childhood game of telephone. I often misrepresented what the community needed and what the students could do. Sometimes, I over-promised and sometimes I under-promised,
but I rarely got it right.

Based on these experiences, I began to develop some working principles: (1) I started to move away from a model of discrete research projects toward a model of creating and maintaining databases of information; (2) I started to remove myself, allowing students to negotiate directly with the community entity, thereby generating forms of understanding, trust, and respect that were important for maintaining boundaries around, and commitments to, projects; and (3) I tried to move away from large, class-based projects to smaller, multi-class projects that were flexible. This enabled me to move students and shift projects as both the classroom and community changed.

At the same time I was focusing on the proper community-based research structure, the community was focusing on the community-based planning structure. In June 1998, the LRPC held a town meeting to solicit comments on its draft plan. The LRPC anticipated a crowd of 20-30 people. Surprisingly, over 120 people participated. The student research was partially responsible for the large town meeting turnout. The uniqueness of students involved in this type of work generated a great deal of local media coverage over the previous few months. Additionally, the students had done a lot of surveying. Hence, a large part of the town had been included in the process. Surveyed and interviewed residents showed up to hear the results of a study in which they had participated.

Ultimately, this led to a meeting between Colgate’s president, the Village mayor, and the Town supervisor. The question explored, as one individual stated, was “how do we make sure that all of this enthusiasm is used to get this plan (LRP) implemented?” At the meeting, a campus-community steering committee was formed to explore the idea of creating a freestanding, community-controlled non-profit organization that could oversee implementing the LRPC.

In the summer of 1998, a formal commitment was made to start the Partnership For Community Development. The Partnership is a freestanding non-profit. Colgate’s president, the Village mayor, and town supervisor each appoint two board members. The Board appoints an additional six members. Colgate pays 80 percent of the operational costs, while the Village and Town each pay 10 percent. As of this writing, the Partnership has four staff members.

Second Stage: Developing the “Life’s Work” Project

Over the next few years, the Partnership worked on a variety of projects with student research to provide much needed support. I want to concentrate on one initiative—the development of a small business program called Life’s Work.

Over the summer of 1998, the Partnership wanted someone to follow-up on the observation made at one community visioning session that home-based businesses were an important and untapped part of the local business community. With assistance from the IDA and two local banks, one student spent the summer of 1998 mapping home-based businesses (Weinberg, 2000). Having learned my lesson, I kept out of the way. The student got her instructions from the community group. I stayed available to answer methodological questions, but I let the community members guide her. Over the summer, she mapped 83 micro-entrepreneurs.

Approximately 25 of the home-based businesses were developing marketable products sold outside the area. They included a weaver who raised sheep and used the wool to make high-end sweaters, a woodworker who made display cases for retail stores, and a machinist who produced a part for public transportation systems. Yet, these businesses were invisible. Few people knew they existed even though they paid $10-15 dollars an hour, which was twice the average area manufacturing wage. In interviews, most of the businesses reported a desire to expand. The student research found technical assistance to be the important missing factor. The student argued that most of the micro-entrepreneurs had one good skill, usually in producing the product, but lacked other business skills like marketing and accounting needed for business expansion.

During the 1998-1999 academic year, groups from my community development Sociology classes took the original data and examined different small business development models. Essentially, they conducted best practice research. I concentrated on methods and theory, allowing the students to work directly with the Partnership to set the research question parameters. At the semester end, the students presented their research to the Partnership.

During the same semester, another group of students studied the viability of small businesses in the downtown business district. They interviewed and collected data from local business owners. Rather than concentrate on a particular Partnership project, the students worked to create a database on small businesses. To do so, they worked closely with a newly formed Partnership committee called the Small Business Development Team.

The Small Business Development Team outlined information categories and business types that the committee identified as potentially important. This turned out to be a good strategy. As a new start-up,
Partnership priorities were constantly changing. The students were not affected by the ebb and flow of internal Partnership politics. They remained focused on creating an inventory of information on businesses and programs that could be used for any important projects that emerged from the Partnership.

The student research projects corroborated the need for technical assistance. During late spring, the Small Business Development Team used the student research to develop a program vision that would come to be called Life’s Work (see www.partnersatwork.org)—a small business development program providing targeted technical assistance to businesses. The program was built on four findings of the student research: (1) there were micro-businesses that could expand, (2) the micro-businesses needed targeted technical assistance, (3) it was more logical to hire assistance rather than try to train the entrepreneurs, and (4) the technical assistance existed in the region, but the networks did not exist between the micro-businesses and the technical assistance providers.

During the fall 2000 semester, I taught the community development class again. We developed a range of class projects. One group would interview local businesses to track exactly what the businesses needed to grow. The interviews also documented support for the proposed Life’s Work program. Another project worked with a local group of merchants to research best practices for associations to see if they could cut costs by working together. A third project surveyed local residents to see if they would buy locally if businesses delivered more, while another worked with the local merchants association to develop a “buy local” campaign. Finally, a group did a marketing analysis for a larger business in the community. All the projects were designed to add information to our growing database on small businesses, including documenting support for the project. The Partnership also used the projects to generate local political support as various Partnership community members used the data to make presentations to different associations on opportunities for small business development.

This structure worked well. Each student was assigned to a project, but the projects had very different timetables and needs. I was able to mix and match students to projects that fit their academic interests. In class, students regularly used their experiences to reflect on and critique different readings on barriers and opportunities for development. Since many readings were urban-based, the projects helped students make leaps to rural applications. While the leaps were not always accurate, it was a wonderful intellectual exercise that provided students an opportunity to combine data and theory.

At three different points in the semester, I asked project teams to talk about their projects. During these presentations, they also solicited help from other students. This allowed students to volunteer to help, if they wanted more involvement. It also allowed me to move students to projects that better fit their needs.

The projects went smoothly for most of the term, and the research we were doing started to generate local attention. I was asked to present at the usual civic organizations, including the local Rotary Club. This drew attention and built excitement. At one presentation, I was approached by the executive director of an older, established non-profit offering to work with the Partnership to write a grant for Life’s Work. The Partnership needed to take advantage of the opportunity. It was a wonderful opportunity to build alliances with an important non-profit. However, the timeline was short. The Partnership expected us to drop everything and work on the grant. It required locating businesses that would agree to be pilots in the program. Additionally, we needed to develop profiles of these businesses, documenting why they would make good pilots.

This all occurred during midterms. Having learned my lesson, I let the student negotiate project details. The students met with the Partnership to hear about the opportunities, and the need, for research. We already had the database of stored information, which we could use to construct the text of the profiles. We only needed agreements by business owners to participate in the program, as well as pictures of the business owners for the profiles. Two students were willing to put in extra effort to get the grant done, because they had met and developed relationships with the Partnership members. One student commented, “You get committed and want to help as much as you can.”

The only tension arose when a couple of students made inappropriate comments at a downtown merchants’ meeting about the shabbiness of some downtown storefronts. The project had been designed to build trust between merchants and the Partnership. Consequently, the comments exacerbated perceptions that the downtown projects were about replacing the current store owners with better businesses. To deal with this tension, I moved some students. Since we had multiple projects, moving the students to another project did not pose logistical challenges. The experience of being moved off a project taught the students a great lesson. It also partially mended fences with the local merchants.

Unfortunately, the Partnership did not get the
grant. However, they now had a grant application completed and commitments from businesses to participate. The Small Business Development Team set out to acquire project funding. Student research continued to provide the needed data, but in more creative ways. Some students performed a marketing analysis for a local group of crafters who wanted to start a furniture company. The research produced data on regional markets for a variety of local, craft-oriented businesses and the strategies for placing goods in particular stores. This provided good data for grants while also building positive relationships between the Partnership and the prospective business. Students also conducted a series of follow-up interviews with local businesses to acquire more refined data for various grant applications and public presentations.

The student research helped the Partnership as its board members began discussing the need for a small business development program. Board members presented to the Rotary Club, various bodies of the Colgate Alumni Corporation, the Colgate Board of Trustees, Village Board, Town Board, and other important civic organizations. The presentations generated excitement. The community perceived that development could focus on local businesses, thus discouraging any influx of outsiders. The Colgate community learned that local resources could be leveraged.

The students also worked with the Small Business Development team to organize workshops for local businesses. The workshops were designed to document progress to potential funders, provide short-term advice to small businesses, and demonstrate the Partnership’s capacity to assist local businesses. Students took charge of the publicity, took field notes capturing the workshop enthusiasm, and did follow-up assessment phone calls.

Third Stage: Securing Funding

In the fall of 2000, the Partnership received a small grant to pilot the Life’s Work project. The funding would provide technical assistance to 10 businesses. However, the Small Business Development Team had 13 businesses that sought assistance. Student research allowed them to stretch the funding in two ways. Students conducted some of the research on behalf of consultants, reducing the time a consultant needed to complete a project. This was important because consultants were the project’s most expensive element. They also directly assisted businesses that otherwise would have been turned down. For example, students did a number of studies about potential markets for retail stores. They also created focus groups involving students, faculty, and community residents for a proposed wine bar.

Over the next year, the Small Business Development Team worked with 13 businesses. At the end of the pilot phase, student research was used for assessment purposes. This became important for round-two funding because it allowed the Small Business Development Team to document often hidden successes. While the small businesses have not grown into large firms, the formal evaluation documented measurable impacts on business owners’ confidence and community perceptions. The assessment also demonstrated organizational capacity. The Partnership could document that the Small Business Development Team was acquiring the skills and organizational strength needed for project expansion. To quote a foundation staff member, “we want to invest in organizations that are going places. Your student research is great because it is unusual and it shows creative capacity.”

Tensions In Community-Based Research

Student research projects were important to the successes of the Partnership and Life’s Work pilot program. However, the process was not always easy. Community-based research has inherent tensions that require careful negotiation.

Such tensions are not unique to community-based research, but are exacerbated by it. Service-learning projects must be negotiated on an academic semester schedule. Under ideal circumstances, this can be cumbersome. Students arrive at the start of a semester. The first week (or more) is lost. The last week of the semester (or more) is lost. In between, we have 10-12 weeks to realistically facilitate student involvement in the community. More traditional service-oriented projects have some flexibility at both ends. For example, our local shelter has a constant need for volunteers and can usually take one more student. Since students are providing direct service, they can stop when the semester ends. There is no logical start or end date to the direct service. How many students go and what times they participate is often flexible. Likewise, there is typically some leeway to negotiate changing needs.

With community-based research, the community entity often has less flexibility to negotiate what students do, and when. In this case, the Partnership needed our help at specific times. Initially, the Small Business Development Team needed data for a grant application. During the pilot phase, particular businesses consultants required data within a very short period. Often, these requests came midsemester, or during the summer. They needed us to accommodate those requests.

Further, many community-based research pro-
jects have high stakes. Quality always matters with service-learning. However, a traditional direct-service project can still move forward and achieve outcomes if student work falls short of expectations. For example, a student performing more traditional service for a neighborhood group might fail to show up. Regardless, the other students can still attend as the project completion does not depend on one student. If all of the students fail to show up, the community will be angry, because their event will be ruined. My relationship with them will be tarnished. However, the next event will still happen. If all of the students withdraw from the project, I will be angry, but can usually recruit new students within a few days.

Community-based research has little gray area. Either the project is or is not completed. In a recent meeting, a faculty member associated with the project said, “it is black or white, either the students collected useable data or they did not...and the stakes are really high.” In our case, the student interviews with small businesses were only useful if they were completed with some degree of quality. If one student fails to collect data or does it incorrectly, the entire research project can be tainted. In one instance, we had students surveying community residents. One student did the surveying incorrectly, raising issues about the reliability of responses. However, we did not learn about the problem until the surveys had been recorded. There was no way to go back and retrieve the tainted surveys.

Problems can get worse. A group project may fall apart. The students may develop conflicts, or may just do the projects poorly. In such situations, I can recruit more students, but need them to have some research experience. Typically, a project will grind to a halt while I recruit more students and train them. This can have short- and long-term consequences for the organization and the community. If a project falls apart, the community partner can lose a funding opportunity.

As a result, community-based research has less flexibility and higher consequences for failed projects. The criteria are difficult to meet when dealing with college students whose needs and issues are ever-shifting and whose intentions often do not match results. In fact, the service-learning literature is clear about the need for community partners to be flexible and open about the quality of projects (Zlotkowski, 1998). This is more true with the types of projects done through community-based research.

To deal with these tensions, a number of people at Colgate have developed a team-based approach to work with the Partnership. Between semesters, faculty and our director of Community Outreach work with the Partnership to broadly set parameters for a community-based research project. For obvious reasons, we need to make sure that projects will be available to fit within the course work and anticipated skills of the students.

During the first week of classes, teams are created paying particular attention to skills and time. We want students with complementary skills who are able to devote similar time to the project. The size of a project team can vary, but typically a team consists of 4-5 members.

During the second week of classes, the team meets with the Partnership to negotiate the project specifics. I provide the students with a set of questions to address, but do not typically attend the meeting.

The project team then returns to campus to develop research project ideas. We work closely with students to refine projects. Our refinement usually means attention to methodological concerns. We also encourage students to think about projects that allow them to work with the Partnership, but are not dependent upon them.

Students then conduct their research. We set up the project around a “V”-shaped communications model: the students report to us and the Partnership, but we try to stay out of the way.

At the semester end, students present their work to the Partnership. To reduce student anxiety, I developed more flexible assignments. A student’s grade is based on ability to use a project to reflect on larger intellectual issues. Hence, the graded project is not just the work that the student produced for the Partnership. Rather, I ask students to use the projects and course material to address theoretical issues through reflection. The final project is typically some sort of assessment project that asks students to assess their projects and outline next steps for the Partnership. For example, one semester, the final exam was the following question:

I am attaching a “draft” concept piece for the COVE. In two hours, write a response to the draft concept piece. Make sure that you draw from all of the texts, your experiences, and our class conversations. Be specific and precise.

These types of projects tend to reduce the correlation between the quality of the project outcomes and the student’s grade. Instead, the student’s grade depends on the ability to use the project and course material to formulate good ideas and analysis. In fact, some of the best papers have come from students with smaller or failed community-based research projects.

Rural Community-Based Research

Community development in rural settings is difficult. Rural communities often lack the community-based organizations, foundations, and consul-
tants needed to anchor development projects. The best hope for many rural communities will be tapping into the tremendous resources of local universities and colleges (Weinberg, 2000). In many cases, this requires a shift in relationships. Colleges and universities have been remarkably removed from community development efforts. This is particularly true at rural liberal arts colleges. For example, in the 1980s Colgate’s president proudly announced that we were a college separate from the local community. In other cases, universities have pushed their own forms of development over the community, leaving behind legacies of mistrust.

Community-based research can be one way of reestablishing ties between rural communities and colleges. It allows the community to tap into university resources without being dominated by university interests. In this case, student community-based research provided: (1) data needed for projects, (2) enthusiasm needed to launch a community-based development organization, and (3) networks to alumni and other funders. Importantly, it did so in a non-threatening way because the community retained control over the projects.

However, rural communities also present unique challenges for community-based research. Without well-established non-profits, there were not prepackaged projects into which to plug students. Often, I found myself having to deal with changing or ill-defined projects. Likewise there were not non-profit staff members to help students with projects. I also found myself helping students do projects that went well beyond my expertise. In the case of Life’s Work, I was a political sociologist working with students on business plans and marketing analysis.

Our success came from learning to negotiate the community-based research. When done right, the students learned, the community prospered, and the college reaped benefits in the classroom and community. This suggests that community-based research can be a successful form of service-learning. As such, this paper suggests that community-based research has potential for generating measurable community development gains, especially in rural communities.

References


Author

ADAM S. WEINBERG is associate professor of Sociology and Dean of the College at Colgate University. He is the author of two books and more than twenty-five articles on issues of community development, service-learning, and sustainable development.