Principles of Best Practice for Community-Based Research[1]

Kerry Strand, *Hood College*
Sam Marullo, *Georgetown University*
Nick Cutforth, *University of Denver*
Randy Stoecker, *University of Toledo*
Patrick Donohue, *Middlesex County College*

Community-based research (CBR) offers higher education a distinctive form of engaged scholarship and a transformative approach to teaching and learning. In this article, we propose a CBR model that is genuinely collaborative and driven by community rather than campus interests; that democratizes the creation and dissemination of knowledge; and that seeks to achieve positive social change. We demonstrate how this model translates into principles that underlie the practice of CBR in four critical areas: campus-community partnerships, research design and process, teaching and learning, and the institutionalization of centers to support CBR.

Community outreach has become part and parcel of the missions of an increasing number of American colleges and universities. Several forces are driving this trend toward campus-community engagement. One is growing criticism of higher education's apparent insensitivity to the challenges faced by their adjacent neighborhoods: urban decay, environmental threats, growing economic inequality, and unmet needs of vulnerable children, families, and whole communities in areas such as education, health care, housing, criminal and juvenile justice, and employment (Marullo & Edwards, 1999). A second force for change comes from the widespread perception that the intellectual work of the professorate is unnecessarily narrow and largely irrelevant to societal concerns. This criticism is best developed in Ernest Boyer's (1990) widely-cited *Scholarship Reconsidered*, in which he argues that the "scholarship of discovery"—in the pursuit of new knowledge—should not be the only valued and rewarded form of scholarship. He suggests that the scholarships of integration, pedagogy, and especially application are other forms of scholarship that are undervalued and largely neglected, although they offer the potential for encouraging intellectual work that is truly useful and relevant in modern society. A third force driving the trend toward community engagement has to do with students, particularly the growing concern that despite our best intentions, graduates leave our institutions largely disengaged from political issues, disenchanted with the ability of government to effect positive change, and disinclined and ill-equipped to assume an active role in civic life. Here the implication is that we need to re-think what and how we teach in order to ensure that we truly engage students, not only with their communities but also with the learning process in general.

As a result of all this, a growing number of colleges and universities have forged partnerships with a wide variety of community groups and agencies—schools, social service agencies, neighborhood organizations, businesses, and health care providers—to share institutional resources and expertise as well as provide students experiential learning opportunities beyond what is possible in traditional college classes. One particularly promising activity that has grown out of these campus-community partnerships is what has come to be called community-based research (CBR). CBR is collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students, and community members in projects that address a community-identified need. It differs in important ways not only from traditional academic research, but also from the sort of charity-oriented service-learning that has come to be practiced and promoted at many colleges and universities. Indeed, the distinctive combination of collaborative inquiry, critical analysis, and social action that CBR entails makes it a particularly engaging and transformative approach to teaching and engaged scholarship. Moreover, its potential to unite the three traditional academic missions of teaching, research, and service in innovative ways makes it a potentially revolutionary strategy for achieving long-lasting and fundamental institutional change.

All this suggests that CBR is a next important stage of service-learning and engaged scholarship, and explains the growing interest in CBR among professors, students, and community members—especially those who are committed to service-learning. However, in contrast to the significant body of literature about service-learning that has emerged over the last decade, very little has been written about CBR. In this paper, we draw on our own extensive and varied experiences with CBR as teachers, researchers, administrators, scholars, and community activists to propose a CBR model based on what we see as its three central features: collaboration, democratization of knowledge, and social change. We then discuss how this CBR model translates into principles that govern its practice in four critical areas: campus-community partnerships; research design and process; teaching and learning; and institutionalizing CBR on our campuses.

History and Principles of CBR

CBR has a long history and diverse intellectual roots that are reflected in the terms variously used to describe it: action research, participatory research, popular education, empowerment research, participatory action research, and others. Practitioners of research that is participatory and community-based come from many different fields in and outside of academia and work in many different parts of the world—all of which make a precise history and commonly-accepted definition of CBR a bit problematic. Nonetheless, most community-based researchers draw from several common historical and modern strands. The first is the *popular education model*, which is widely associated with the work of Paolo Freire (1970). Freire advocated for education as a political tool to effect social change at local and global levels, arguing that learning that raises people's consciousness and enhances their understanding of oppressive social conditions can lead to social transformation. This model similarly shaped the work of the Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) founded by Myles Horton in Tennessee in 1933 (Horton, 1989). The second important influence on current CBR comes from what might be called the *participatory research model*. This approach grew mainly out of liberation struggles in the Third World over the past few decades and has been adapted, as well, to research with traditionally disadvantaged groups in North America. The PR (participatory research) and PAR (participatory action research) approaches are rooted in a critique of traditional Western social science research, whose rigidity, presumed objectivity, and authority of researchers and research expertise undermine community development efforts (Hall, 1992; Park, 1992). Finally, CBR also traces some of its roots to the "action research" approach introduced by Kurt Lewin (1948), who used it as a tool to increase worker productivity and satisfaction through promoting democratic relationships in the workplace. Lewin's work is considered a more conservative influence on CBR because it de-emphasized community participation and failed to challenge existing power arrangements.

about their work together—ideally, with the balance of power tipped toward the community when it comes to basic project decisions. These include what the research question or focus will be, and shaping and implementing change strategies implied by the research. In reality, however, sharing power presents significant challenges to campus-community collaborations facing embedded hierarchies based on differences in class, race, institutional power, and expertise (Shefner & Cobb, 2002). However, when community members are afforded less authority than their academic counterparts, the research is likely to be less valuable to the community, and the partnership reproduces the very sort of inequities that CBR seeks to challenge and change. This makes the goal to share power especially compelling.

Clear and careful communication is another essential principle of effective partnerships. CBR brings together a mix of people from very different worlds and requires that they engage in conversations to accomplish a challenging and complex task: designing and executing a research project. To do this, partners from both sides must work to avoid the dangers of what Freire calls "alienating rhetoric" (1970, p. 77). All participants must strive to understand and be understood, and this means avoiding the inaccessible language of their discipline or community, clarifying meanings and assumptions that might be obscure to outsiders, and otherwise working to develop a common discourse that make subsequent partner interactions inclusive and fruitful. And it almost goes without saying that everyone at the research table not only must be an effective communicator, but also a patient and careful listener.

Just as successful partners learn how to communicate across sociocultural divides, they must also learn to recognize and deal with the various institutional constraints that may obstruct their working together. Community organizations and higher education institutions are very different in size, financial stability and cash flow, organizational structure and accountabilities, levels of bureaucracy, interorganizational relations, and reward structures. They also operate on very different schedules and have different priorities that shape deadlines, due dates, and "time off." Although these differences can frustrate the growth of strong CBR partnerships, they can be overcome by partners who are committed to good communication, trust, and empathy with one another's circumstances and constraints. Perhaps more than anything else, *flexibility* (along with some good humor) can go a long way toward helping partners work through logistical and other challenges.

The last three principles governing effective partnerships have to do with desired outcomes or results of partnering. A CBR partnership's most obvious objective is to produce useful research. However, successful partnerships are also ones in which:

- Partners' primary interests or needs are met,
- Partners' organizational capacities are enhanced, and
- Partners adopt shared, long-range social change perspectives.

Academic and community partners' needs and interests are bound to diverge in some significant ways beyond their common goal to produce useful and quality research findings. On the academic side, some priority is likely to be given to providing students a valuable learning experience, and perhaps enhancing the faculty member's teaching credentials or producing publishable research that otherwise furthers their career. The institution might have some goals as well, such as improving its communi-

ty—to help marginalized groups gain more influence by becoming better organized, more proficient advocates for themselves and their constituents, and better able to mobilize resources on their own behalf. The third area of change is in society-at-large. When it is done well, CBR models participatory democracy at its best and helps participants acquire knowledge, skills, and commitments that they carry to other projects, organizations, classes, jobs, and communities throughout their lives. Given the modest impact of most single CBR projects, a long-term perspective is also important to avoid burnout and retain commitment to the ongoing work of the partnership.

Research Design and Process

A second critical part of CBR is the design and conduct of the research itself. Here, again, our concern is how the central features of the CBR model that we propose—collaboration, democratization of knowledge, and social change—bear on the myriad decisions about the research itself. CBR is both different from, and similar to, conventional academic research. CBR draws on conventional methodological protocols and procedures defined within each discipline and insists on systematic and rigorous inquiry that characterizes research at its best. At the same time, CBR demands new ways of thinking about every aspect of the research process.

First, *collaboration* means that, ideally, everyone involved participates in discussions and decisions at every stage of the research. This helps to ensure that the research is both useful and valid—a result of incorporating the perspectives and ideas of community members into decisions about measures, samples, and modes of data collection. And when community members also participate in carrying out the research, their commitment and capacity are enhanced. However, in reality, this sort of uniformly equal participation throughout the research process is often hard to achieve for various reasons related to the nature of the project, type of community represented, characteristics of the organization with

will likely bring about, at most, a minor change in policy, programming, or service delivery—or perhaps a small change in the organization itself. Successful social change at the grassroots level is even more problematic, as academic researchers (and even more, students) are typically unwilling or ill-equipped to engage in the sort of organizing work that is requisite to bringing about any sort of "popular education" or political mobilization of the community (Stoecker, 1999). Rather, a more realistic and useful stance is one that recognizes CBR's limits—particularly, one that sees it as just one part of the larger social change agenda of an agency or organization. By seeking to understand that larger agenda, the researchers can more effectively tailor their research to its aims, while at the same time accepting the very real limits of their own social change objectives.

Teaching and Learning

Next we consider how the principles governing CBR are brought to bear on teaching and learning. Although much evidence documents that service-learning generally produces a range of positive attitudinal, interpersonal, and academic learning outcomes, researchers and practitioners have recently acknowledged that some service-learning experiences are more valuable than others. They have also begun to identify some different benefits and limitations associated with different kinds of community-based learning experiences. Eyler and Giles (1999) find that positive student learning outcomes are in part dependent on the quality of the service-learning placement and that a "high quality" placement is one in which students can do meaningful work, exercise initiative, have important responsibilities, engage in varied tasks, and work directly with practitioners or other community members, and where their work is clearly connected to the course content. Along the same lines, Mooney and Edwards (2001) suggest that what they call "advocacy service-learning"—emphasizing social justice, social change, real community collaboration, and critical analysis of the structural roots of problems—produces benefits for students that may be absent or de-emphasized in more conventional or "charity-oriented" service-learning experiences. That is, students whose community-based experience requires that they collaborate with community members, critically analyze the sources of problems, consider alternative responses, confront political and ideological barriers to change, weigh the merits of legislative or other political strategies, and experience their own potential for social action are more likely to develop the leadership skills, political awareness, and

civic literacy that represent developmentally richer forms of service-learning. The CBR model we propose here would seem to provide students with just these sorts of experiences.

Another and related appeal of CBR is that its core features—collaboration, democratization of knowledge, and a social change/social justice agenda—dovetail well with the goals of what is often called "critical pedagogy." Varieties of critical pedagogy, including feminist pedagogy, have made their way into classes at every educational level and inspire the work of teachers committed to teaching and learning in ways that fundamentally challenge and transform—rather than reproduce and legitimate—existing social arrangements, including what are considered some of conventional education's most oppressive features. Although definitions of critical pedagogy vary, they tend to center on three major goals (adapted from Hartley, 1999), each of which is also embodied in CBR's principles and practices.

1) *A focus on collective/collaborative learning that de-emphasizes hierarchy, including authority differences between teacher and student.* Perhaps the most obvious consequence of collaboration that is part of our CBR model is that it undermines conventional status differences between campus and community partners. However, with students participating as equal members of a CBR team, other status and authority differences—between professor and student as well as those based on age and experience—are blurred as well. When students work alongside community members and the professor as teachers, learners, and researchers, they are also empowered as they acquire a sense of efficacy about their own abilities and potential contributions.

2) *A demystification of conventional knowledge, including the notion that objectivity is impossible, that knowledge is not neutral, and that people's "lived experiences" are valid sources of knowledge.* CBR contrasts with conventional academic research, as it also resembles critical pedagogy, with its insistence that scientific research can never be value free, that knowledge is a form of power that should be collectively produced and controlled, and that "local knowledge" of the community is as valid and important to the research as researcher expertise (Small, 1995). In critical pedagogy, these principles are most often applied to the classroom setting, where the students' experience and knowledge, rather than the teacher's authority, is the starting point for learning. This becomes a way of validating "positionality"—the distinctive perspectives and worldviews of students with diverse social characteristics that render them marginal in conventional classrooms and within

conventional knowledge frameworks. In CBR, the affirmation of "lived experience" extends to and empowers both community members and students, two groups whose authority does not hold sway in conventional educational or research contexts. Moreover, CBR models for students alternative ways of thinking about the production and control of knowledge: why we do research and who should control knowledge that is produced (Strand, 2000).

3) *A focus on teaching for social change*. Critical pedagogy asserts that education ought to be liberatory rather than oppressive, transformative rather than oriented toward maintaining the status quo. It should contribute to social betterment by challenging existing social relations and structures of privilege, and by empowering students with knowledge, skills, and inclinations that prepare them to be active agents of social change in their lives. CBR does all this. In the course of their involvement in CBR, students develop: the capacity to think critically and analytically about existing structures of oppression and injustice, skills that prepare them to operate as effective change agents in the public sphere, a commitment to values of social justice and human dignity, and a belief in their own and others' ability to apply their knowledge and skills to bring about improvement in people's lives.

A final and related way that CBR translates into effective teaching and learning has to do with what is commonly referred to as "civic education." Most colleges and universities share a commitment to graduating students who are prepared for democratic citizenship, and yet there is widespread concern about the apparent failure of institutions to achieve this, as evidenced by the political apathy, cynicism, disengagement, individualism, and pessimism that characterize even many of our most accomplished graduates. While service-learning (and, indeed, any sort of volunteer work) does seem to raise students' social and civic consciousness (Eyler & Giles, 1999), a number of critics suggest that preparation for active citizenship requires more than just moral commitments and predispositions. More important are the knowledge and skills necessary to take thoughtful and concerted political action to bring about social change (see Astin, 1999; Barber, 1992; Boyte & Kari, 2000; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). These include what CBR is most likely to impart: the capacity to think critically about social policies and conditions, the ability to access and evaluate information, the skill to work with others on projects that recognize and require multiple contributions, and a sense of political efficacy that will drive one to take on the challenges of active citizenship in a participatory democracy.

Institutionalizing CBR and Transforming the Academy

Last, we turn our attention to the principles underlying CBR's effective institutionalization on our campuses and in our communities. When we talk about social change in relation to CBR, we typically think first about its contribution to change in the community. However, in important respects the most significant kind of transformation CBR promises is in colleges and universities themselves, to define, support, and reward their historical missions of teaching, research, and service. In a more immediate sense, CBR practitioners are calling on these institutions to provide organizational and administrative structures necessary to support and sustain CBR work and community partnerships. It is possible (and not uncommon) for individual faculty members to develop partnerships and involve students in CBR projects quite on their own, without any formal institutional supports. However, the different tasks or functions connected with CBR are accomplished far more effectively when institutions organize formally to support this work, in the form of a program-based CBR office, a campus-based center, or even a local/regional consortium.

CBR is complex work that is most effectively carried out with the help of an administrative structure, campus or community-based, organized to address seven functions or tasks. Institutional organization for CBR must do more than carry out these seven functions, however. It must also embody the core features of the CBR model that we propose. In other words, true collaboration, new approaches to defining and acquiring knowledge, and a commitment to social change must become manifest in the structures constructed to undertake this work. The seven tasks or functions are:

- mobilize resources,
- build multiplex (deep) relationships among collaborators,
- create appropriate divisions of labor,
- manage information and authority relations,
- devise rules and control mechanisms for undertaking research projects,
- manage external relationships, and
- construct sustainability mechanisms.

The research process is complex and requires multiple skills and concurrent tasks, and individual researchers are limited by how many activities they can undertake at once, and their own skills and resources. Any given CBR project might require administering an office, coordinating logistics,

Conclusion

We have proposed a CBR model that is collaborative and community-driven, that democratizes the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and is committed to social change for social justice. CBR offers higher education a powerful and innovative means for combining the traditional academic missions of teaching, service, and scholarship. It also has the potential to help colleges and universities become relevant to their adjacent communities in ways that can ultimately transform both. As CBR gains momentum on campuses and in communities across the country, the challenge is to ensure that these ideals are translated into principles and practices that do not simply reproduce old arrangements, but bring real benefits to communities and fundamental changes to higher education.

Notes

[1] This essay is based on *Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices* by Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Randy Stoeker, and Patrick Donohue (Jossey-Bass, forthcoming May, 2003).

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Authors

KERRY STRAND is a professor of Sociology at Hood College (MD), where she has worked with students and community partners on almost two dozen CBR projects over the past five years. She has published papers and presented numerous talks and workshops on service-learning, CBR, and other topics related to undergraduate teaching and learning. She is co-author (with Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Randy Stoeker, and Patrick Donohue) of *Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices* and is currently working on an anthology for students in undergraduate social science research methods courses.

SAM MARULLO is associate professor and chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georgetown University. He is also

director of the Community Research and Learning (CoRAL) Network of Washington DC. He regularly teaches a year-long, CBR seminar for undergraduates, Project D.C., which is the capstone course for students with a concentration in Social Justice Analysis.

NICK CUTFORTH is associate professor of Educational Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Denver. He directs DU's Community Based Research Project and coordinates the Colorado Community Based Research Network. He is coeditor (with Don Hellison) of Youth Development and Physical Activity: Linking Universities and Communities (Human Kinetics, 2000). He is co-author (with Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Randy Stoecker, and Patrick Donohue) of Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices (Jossey-Bass, 2003).

RANDY STOECKER is professor of Sociology at the University of Toledo. He has been the evaluation coordinator for the Bonner Foundation's Community Research Project, which supports most of the networks in this article. He has experience with a wide range of CBR projects over the past 15 years, and moderates the COMM-ORG online conference on community organizing and development at http://comm-org.utoledo.edu

PATRICK DONOHUE is an assistant professor of Political Science at Middlesex County College