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Engaging Undergraduate Social Work Students in Community-Based Research: Developing Research Skills Through Hands-On Learning

An ongoing concern in social work, as with many professions, is the wide divide between research and practice. Many social work students are drawn to the profession because of their interest in helping people; they are concerned more with the doing of social work than about the research that informs their practice. Evidence suggests social work students generally feel reluctant about conducting research, exhibit anxiety in research-methods courses, and perceive that research is less important to their field compared to other professions (Bolin, Lee, GlenMaye, and Yoon 2012; Green, Bretzin, Leininger, and Stauffer 2001; McConnell, Kaal, and Marton 2013). However, once in the field, social workers often become involved in research (e.g., practice evaluation, program evaluation, needs assessments, etc). Given the profession's commitment to evidence-based practice and the necessity for practitioners to be critical consumers and producers of research, it is imperative that undergraduate education in social work provide the skills students need to competently engage in research. A promising approach for social work educators to foster student interest in research is the use of community-based research in the classroom.

Community-based Research

Community-based research (CBR) is a collaborative research effort in which academic and community partners share in all aspects of the research process (Israel, Schelz, Parker, and Becker 1998). In social work, CBR may involve social action, community-needs assessment, and monitoring and evaluation of prevention or intervention strategies. Projects can facilitate long-lasting university-community partnerships and provide opportunities for students to be actively engaged in meeting the needs of their communities through research. Cooke and Thorme (2011) describe five components related to the process of community-based research: (1) developing and maintaining community partnerships, (2) developing a research plan, (3) developing CBR methodology and implementation, (4) data analysis, and (5) communicating findings. This type of research is particularly well-suited for social work, a profession that is guided by core ethical principles including service, social justice, and respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the person (National Association of Social Workers 2008), as well as the community. Thus, engaging undergraduate students in CBR may not only foster a professional commitment to research but also a deeper commitment to social work's values and ethics.

Social Work and Applied Learning

Social work is, by nature, an applied professional field of study. In fact, Jane Addams (1912), a founding mother of social work, suggested that the best way for students to learn was through direct field experience. She described how the youthful desire for social action can be harnessed when students acquire practical learning experiences long before they enter their professional fields.

In social work, experiential learning is the mechanism that builds necessary skills, knowledge, and values. Generally, social work education uses the field practicum experience as the primary vehicle for experiential learning. The field practicum is typically completed in the last undergraduate year; students are expected to integrate three years of classroom learning into that experience in direct practice. A frequent challenge of the timing is the difficulty students may encounter when they try to practice the skills they have primarily learned in classroom settings (Knee 2002); this challenge is particularly salient for research. Furthermore, because students tend to be less interested in research at the outset of their undergraduate education, they may be less motivated to learn information that will be helpful to them later on in applying research content in the field practicum and beyond.

A growing number of studies describe the pedagogical integration of experiential learning into methods aimed at engaging undergraduates in social work research (Brown and Kinsella 2006; Holley, Risley-Curtiss, Stott, Jackson, and Nelson 2007; Knee 2002; Lemieux and Allen 2007; Rice and Walsh 2014; Sather, Weitz, and Carlson 2007). These studies show promise for engaging social work students in service learning or community-based work in courses that are not typically associated with practical or experiential learning.

Holley and colleagues (2007) included a community-research project in their elective graduate-level course, and as a result students reported increased confidence and skills in conducting research, as well as greater interest in using research. Knee (2002) involved his undergraduate social work students in a research project that engaged an official from the participating community organization as a co-instructor in the course. His students overwhelmingly reported that

the CBR project helped bridge the gap between an abstract, theoretical understanding of research and its real-world application. Sather et al. (2007) integrated community service into an undergraduate sequence of courses dealing with policy, macro practice, and research methods and found that students experienced a shift in professional goals and deeper understanding of the role of research in the profession of social work. In each of these studies, students' attitudes toward research shifted from disinterest or anxiety to understanding and enthusiasm.

These studies show the benefits of integrating experiential, community-based projects into social-work courses and provide a helpful starting point for educators interested in using these methods in their classrooms. However, additional research is needed in order to better establish the effectiveness of these methods and to promote pedagogical approaches in research courses that resonate with research-reluctant social-work students. The study I outline adds to the growing literature regarding undergraduate research in social work by describing the explicit integration of community-based research into an undergraduate course sequence, and offers preliminary evaluation of the successes and shortcomings of this approach.

Project Overview

During fall 2013, our department partnered with the state of Utah's Department of Workforce Services (DWS) to conduct a community-needs assessment that would identify the educational and employment needs of the state's refugee population. In the fall semester leading up to my students' involvement with this assessment during the spring semester, the interdisciplinary Refugee Needs Assessment (RNA) team made up of faculty, students, and local service providers maintained a collaborative relationship with DWS and sought assistance from individuals from the refugee community. In this phase, we began to develop and refine our research methods. The RNA project team agreed that it would be most helpful to have my students contribute to Phase I of the study, which involved interviewing service providers both in and outside of Utah regarding their perceptions of refugees' educational and employment needs and challenges. These interview data would eventually inform state-level DWS and refugee-service providers about existing services for refugees. In addition, these data would indicate the extent to which current service providers are familiar with refugee needs, as well as any recommendations they might have for improving services. In addition to the data-collection aspects of Phase I, my students were directed to perform initial qualitative-data analyses and to present their findings in oral and written form to the larger project team and other stakeholders.

I taught the standard research-methods class to junior-level social work students during the fall semester using lectures, small-group discussions, student presentations, exams, etc. However, two aspects of the course differed from previous years. First, I integrated topical material concerning refugees into my lectures, and, second, I required all students to complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), training needed for eventual approval of our research protocol by our campus institutional review board (IRB). The project team developed the interview guide and materials for training interviewers, as well as identified 52 service providers for my students to contact for interviews. Attempting to coordinate class members' progress with the work of the needs-assessment team was a challenge, but a graduate teaching assistant was assigned to help manage the burden.

At the beginning of the spring semester, we spent four separate class days introducing the project and training student interviewers. Members of the project team lectured on topics such as refugee needs, culturally competent interviewing, and project-specific interviewing protocols. Students were able to observe and participate in role-playing exercises to help them gain interviewing skills. Supplemental assignments (e.g., writing a paper on cultural competence and observing a refugee clinic and reflecting on the experience) provided the context necessary for students to conduct the interviews and interpret and report their findings. For the paper on cultural competence, students researched the refugee groups that were most prevalent in the state of Utah and reported on relevant cultural practices; the papers were used by the RNA team as reference materials. For the observation/reflection assignment, students attended our local refugee clinic and observed and assisted with tasks such as helping individuals with paperwork and job applications, opening mail, etc. Students then wrote a short reflection on that experience and tied it to the work they were engaging in for the RNA team.
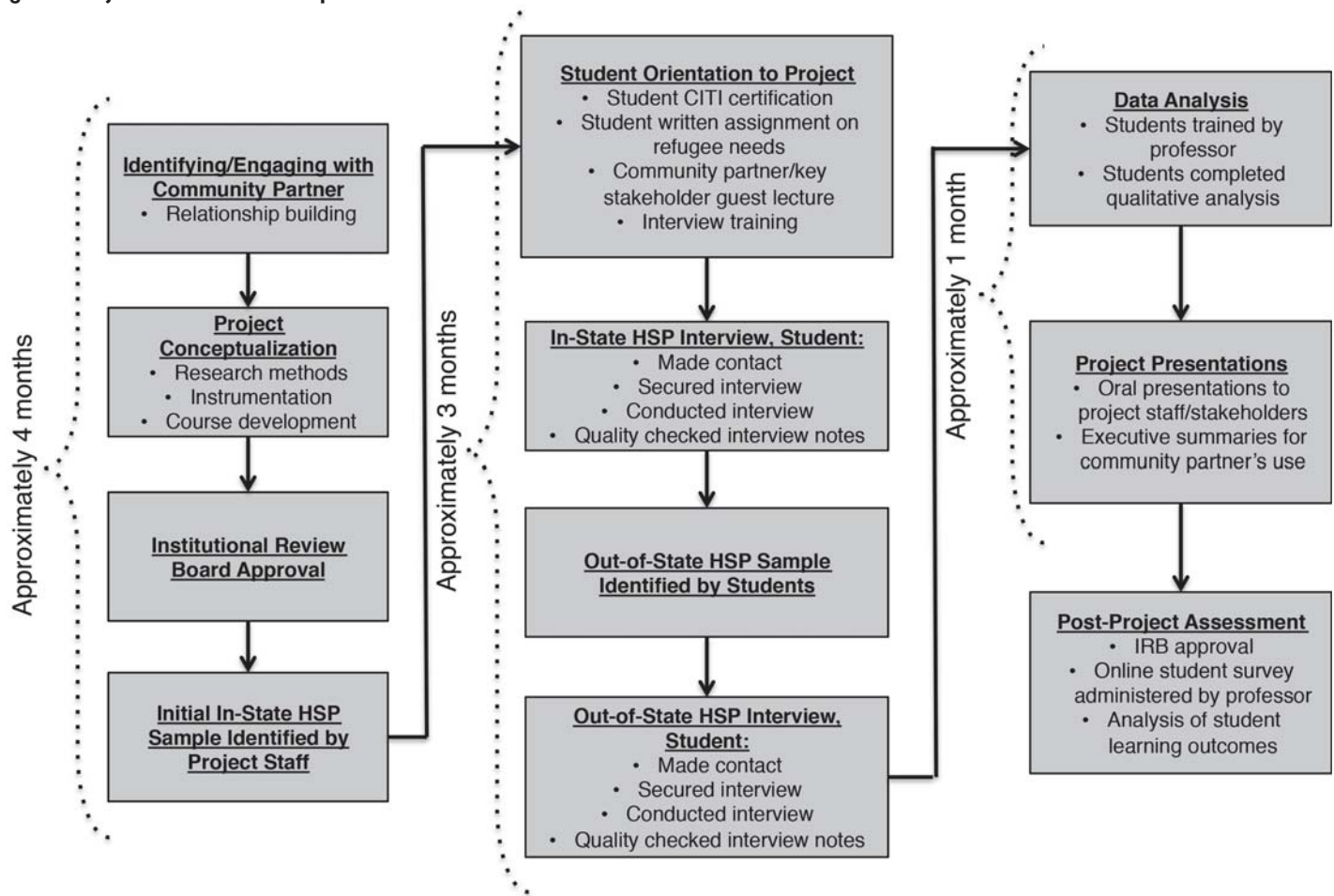
All of the assignments related to data collection, analysis, and reporting processes had a specific due date; however, it was necessary to be flexible given the vast array of challenges individual students encountered. Students were placed in three-person interview teams and phoned their first in-state service provider to schedule a time for either an in-person or phone interview with the service provider at the organization who worked most closely with refugees. Students conducted the interviews with at least one other student present for note-taking. Students then helped develop and implement recruitment strategies for out-of-state service providers. Once the list was vetted, students completed their second interview, following the same interview protocol with the out-of-state provider as they did in the first round of interviews.

I conducted intensive in-class training in analyzing qualitative data toward the end of the semester. I gathered transcripts of the interviews with service providers and sorted them according to topical areas. Then students worked in teams to analyze and present their findings both to the class and to project staff. From my perspective, the most rewarding aspect of the class was watching my students competently discuss their research findings concerning ways to improve delivery of services for refugees. See Figure 1 for a detailed view of the project's timeline and the ways in which the components of community-based research were implemented.

Challenges in Research Implementation

Sampling. As is often the case in social science research, we were unable to interview every service provider identified in our sampling procedures. Despite assistance from the project staff in vetting viable in- and out-of-state providers, many of them were unreachable once students actually attempted to schedule interviews. Approximately half the class required intensive assistance in locating an alternative provider, which resulted in heavier-than-usual student traffic in my office throughout the semester. Additionally, despite our in-class training, some students said they felt ill-prepared to explain the project's purpose over the phone to potential interviewees. It is important to note these sampling problems, because they had the potential to affect the integrity of the research process. With 52 novice researchers

Figure 1. Project Timeline and Components

Notes: HSP indicates Human Service Provider; CITI indicates Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

in the field, there were numerous threats to the validity of the study, particularly related to the variations in conditions for data collection. In order to minimize these threats and address challenges as they arose, training in best practices for recruiting and engaging with interviewees continued throughout the semester, reinforcing the iterative nature of the learning process.

Student concerns. I found that students often became caught up in the details of completing each interview and, at times, lost sight of the connection between what we were learning in class and what they were doing in practice. At almost every lecture, I intentionally integrated information about the research project into the lecture's content. Many students worried about making the phone calls and expressed anxiety about disappointing a project team that was relying on them to collect and analyze data for the needs assessment. I used these instances in class as an opportunity to discuss the personal growth students perceived through their participation in the RNA project.

Administrative challenges. The administrative aspect of implementing the refugee-needs assessment in my classroom was an immense challenge. Despite my own experience with databases, we did not find a tracking system that worked seamlessly until the end of the semester. The challenges included tracking which interviews were completed and with whom, where to store interview transcripts, and how to track these items in relation to student grades. Initial plans for managing these challenges were insufficient. Eventually we used a password-protected spreadsheet that students could access online to input their updates, one which would also allow feedback from me or other project staff members.

Methodology and Outcomes

Following the completion of the course, and with the approval of the IRB, I surveyed my students regarding their experiences in conducting applied research in the community-practice course. Of the 52 students in the course, 26 elected to participate in the survey, which consisted of a series of closed- and open-ended questions administered to students approximately one week after the course ended. On average, the responding students were 25 years old, but approximately 8 in 10 students were 23 years old or younger. The majority of responding students were female (88.5 percent) and had earned an A grade in the course (84.6 percent of respondents).

The first set of survey questions was related to student participation in the refugee-needs assessment and with the competencies the course sequence was intended to foster. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with 13 statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. See Table 1 for results. In addition to the Likert-scale questions, students were asked to

Table 1. Student Perceptions of Participating in Refugee-Needs Assessment (N=26)

Item	M[1]	SD[2]	MIN[3]	MAX[4]
Made me feel as though I made a real contribution.	4.5	0.91	2	5
Was too much to expect from an undergraduate student.	1.85	0.97	1	5
Was stressful.	3.65	0.80	2	5
Pushed me outside my comfort zone.	3.77	1.11	1	5
Improved my overall learning experience.	4.46	0.95	1	5
Helped me understand how one might engage in community practice.	4.58	0.58	3	5
Helped me understand how to conduct a community-needs assessment.	4.73	0.53	3	5
Helped me understand why community-needs assessments are important.	4.92	0.27	4	5
Increased my level of competence in working with diverse populations.	4.73	0.45	4	5
Helped me better understand the importance of system-level change.	4.46	0.76	2	5
Increased my level of cultural competence.	4.69	0.680	2	5
Increased my commitment to social justice.	4.42	0.90	2	5
Increased my professional interest in research.	4.42	0.90	1	5

Notes: M[1] refers to the sample mean; SD[2] refers to the sample standard deviation; MIN[3] refers to the minimum response value reported; MAX[4] refers to the maximum response value reported.

respond to two open-ended statements related to their participation in the needs-assessment project: (1) Please describe how your experiences with the Refugee Needs Assessment affected your learning experience; and (2) What might the professor or project staff have done differently to make the Refugee Needs Assessment a more useful learning experience?

Student responses to the Likert-scale questions were overwhelmingly positive. In particular, students most strongly agreed that the RNA helped them understand how to conduct community-needs assessments and why such assessments are important. These two items are particularly important because they address the utility and applicability of community-needs assessments, a major research task that many social workers become involved with in professional practice. See Table 1 on page 23 for additional results.

Student responses to the first open-ended statement were unanimously positive, with the exception of one student who felt the project was "grunt work." A number of themes emerged in their responses: (1) the benefits of "hands-on" learning, (2) rising to the challenge, (3) integration of skills, and (4) real impact.

Hands-on learning. Seventeen students specifically mentioned the benefit to their learning of using a "hands-on" approach. For example, one student noted, "The hands-on experience helped me to understand the community needs, the refugee needs and experiences, and the ongoing help that a community needs to be a part of for their refugee members." Another noted, "I loved that this class provided so much hands-on experience in the curriculum. I felt that I was being prepared for practicing in the real world rather than just reading about it."

Rising to the challenge. Nine students discussed the stresses of participating in the project, but each of these students discussed it in the context of being challenged and experiencing growth as a result. For example, one student said, "It was tough, it was stressful, and it was definitely not in most of our comfort zones. Learning experiences should provide opportunities to do something new, and frankly, lectures and tests are nothing new and don't provide a positive learning experience for most students. This project is something that no one in the class had ever participated in and even though we hated it at times, it was the most effective way to go about teaching the class."

Similarly, another student noted, "During the process, it was frustrating and time-consuming, but in the end it has helped me learn more and apply that knowledge to real-world situations. This was a big project, but I loved seeing my hard work and time being used for something important."

Integration of skills. As discussed earlier, it is a challenge for social work students to integrate the skills and knowledge they gain in non-practice courses such as research methods. Eleven students mentioned how the RNA solidified what they had learned in the course on research methods. For example, one student noted, "I feel that the refugee needs assessment was an add-on to research. I feel that it reinforced what we had learned in our research class." Another student said, "Being able to incorporate our lessons into action through the use of research to actually feel like a social worker was amazing." In regard to integrating skills across our curriculum, one student noted, "This was such an influential class. Doing the needs assessment really helped me to understand way more about research, community social work, and social work in general, than … any other class." Regarding the application and integration of research skills, another student noted, "I liked that it was a more of a hands-on approach—I can definitely say I know how to do all parts of a research project now!"

Real impact. Eight students noted their feelings of "making a difference" and doing "real work." In particular, one student said, "I loved working in depth on a project. It was nice seeing what actual work looked like and felt like when you are doing it." Another student noted, "I thought it was a really great experience to be a part of something bigger than myself." Regarding the real impact of research, one student said: "It put everything into a new perspective. You can read about these sorts of things all you want, but actually doing it really helps you see how important it is and how realistic it is for a social worker to help make system- and community-wide change through research." In a similar vein another student said, "I really enjoyed the refugee-needs assessment project. It really helped me see the real-world research application to my degree."

We received fewer responses to the second open-ended question, but a number of themes emerged there as well concerning the needs for more time, more organization, and more training.

More time. A challenge from the outset was figuring out how to include enough time in the class schedule to balance both the project's demands and my course's curricular objectives. Four students expressed a desire for more time in class dedicated to the project. One student noted, "We could have taken a few more class periods to discuss what we were all experiencing." And another student expressed anxiety, saying, "Since we had a time restraint, it was really stressful, especially because so much of my grade depended on it." Other students discussed their appreciation for the flexibility I showed them in regard to time constraints. One student noted, "Being able to be flexible is really what made this project work." Another said, "The project required a lot

of flexibility concerning timing." Finally, in discussing recommendations for future integration of community-based research into classes, one student said, "The professor and staff need to continue to be flexible and understanding."

More organization. The most-often discussed area for improvement was in organization, mentioned by six students. Given my flexibility in the timing of completed interviews, I believe students offered me some flexibility as well. Students seemed more open to the unexpected aspects of the project, and they generally responded flexibly when there was deviation from the course organization originally set forth in the syllabus. However, students noted that "organization is key" and that the class could have "been even better with a little bit more organization."

More training. Although the project staff and I assumed we had given my students adequate training on conducting interviews and analyzing qualitative data, this was a student concern throughout the semester, and five students addressed it in their survey responses. They especially focused on the need for more training in interviewing because some of them felt unprepared when they contacted their first interviewee. One student said, "It would be helpful if more information was given about the interview process. I didn't know where to start and it was stress-inducing." Another student said, "I would have liked more training on how to speak with the service providers because I felt like they didn't take us seriously." In regard to data-analysis training, one student said, "I think helping us learn more about how to code and interpret results would have been helpful. It felt too rushed."

Discussion and Recommendations

Similar to previous research in social work and other fields (Holley et al. 2007; Knee 2002; Lopatto et al. 2008), results from this preliminary evaluation demonstrate the benefits of integrating a community-based research project into the sequence of courses in research/community practice. The benefits included an experiential-learning process that challenged students to grow, allowed them to integrate their classroom-based skills, and fostered a sense of accomplishment and pride in having a real impact. Although there were challenges throughout (e.g., time constraints, organizational flaws, and insufficient training), students generally responded positively to the experience. Most importantly, students expressed an interest in and understanding of research. Ideally, this interest and understanding will lead them to competently apply research in the future in a field that relies on evidence-based practice.

While benefits of CBR to the students have been made clear, it is critical to note its benefits to the community. As noted, students analyzed and presented their data to the RNA project team and other stakeholders. They also composed executive summaries for dissemination to the community partner. The quality of those presentations and reports was outstanding, and in my continued conversations with the Refugee Needs Assessment Team and the Department of Workforce Services, these student-generated materials have been used in various meetings throughout the state. Although the validity of the data collected was threatened throughout the process of working with 52 novice undergraduate researchers, the threat was minimized through careful oversight, continued training, and dedicated troubleshooting. In the end, the data my students collected, analyzed, and presented have been useful for their own learning purposes, as well as for our state's Department of Workforce Services.

Moving forward, a number of questions must be addressed in order to build a sustainable CBR program using undergraduate social work students as researchers. First, it is essential that new projects be identified well in advance of the academic year in which they will be implemented. Cooke and Thorme (2011) note the challenge of aligning a community partner's timeline with the traditional academic calendar. One way our social work program is currently addressing this challenge is by conducting an assessment of local community agencies' research needs. We are compiling a short list of interested partners and brainstorming ways we can collaborate with them according to a timeline that makes sense for both the community partner and our classroom.

Another important question regarding sustainability is related to the sheer time commitment and demand placed on the professor by community-based research. If professors perceive the demands on their time to outweigh the benefits demonstrated in their classrooms, a program of undergraduate CBR becomes less sustainable. Two factors that greatly reduced the demands placed on my time were the development of a streamlined, web-based communication system and the dedicated help from my teaching assistant (TA). Using a TA for my project improved the daily organization of the project and offered students an additional source of troubleshooting help. If funding permits, I recommend the use of a TA for undergraduate CBR projects. In addition, interested professors might find funding for course development, TA assistance, or other consultation services within their institution's office of service learning.

Conclusion

Based on the results from this preliminary evaluation, an intensive class project using community-based research holds great promise for teaching the value and utility of research to

undergraduates. As students learned the basics of research in a dynamic, real-world context, they developed a deeper understanding of how research guides their profession and how they may engage in research in the future. Although further study is warranted, it is likely that a CBR project of this scale could be adopted in any number of social work programs, with similar results. ◯

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