

# CURQ Web Vignettes

## Community-defined Research Projects with Undergraduates in Social Work and Nursing

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Connecting students to real-world issues through active community engagement is essential. Integrating the latest evidence into practice is an issue that many healthcare agencies face. As a result, opportunities exist for student teams to assist healthcare agencies in evidence-based practice (EBP) under faculty leadership. Evidence-based practice is finding and incorporating the latest research into current healthcare practice. Engaging pre-professional students from different fields in community-defined research projects, under faculty supervision, is the focus of the collaborative academic-clinical agency partnerships we describe here.

Students working in the community-defined projects come from social work, nursing, and other disciplines. Faculty members develop relationships with healthcare practitioners and community-agency staff, engage students, and work on the project. Each project consists of a faculty member, the student team, a student team leader, and a facilitator from the clinical agency. Projects emerge directly from the agencies, and the topic is mutually agreed upon by the team. The student team, supervised by the faculty member, outlines the plan for the project, which involves collecting, summarizing, and sharing the latest practice-based evidence with the agency.

### Framework of Partnerships

These partnerships differ from traditional faculty-driven research in several ways: The project is mutually agreed upon, there is a reciprocal relationship with a clinical agency, the agency has an identified facilitator, and the student team has a designated leader. Other differences are that students have the opportunity to work on real projects and faculty members are able to discuss interdisciplinary collaborations. Some examples of our collaborative partnerships include:

1. Palliative care at a community hospital. The team worked on a three-phase project related to issues in palliative care, including attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding

oxygen use at the end of life. This project team included one social work professor, one nursing professor, social work students, nursing students, psychology students, pre-med/biology students, a physician, and an advanced-practice nurse.

2. Evidence-based practice projects with three county public-health departments. Staff members asked for research evidence on specific topics, and the students obtained material on topics including scoliosis screening and lead poisoning. The students also led a workshop for the staff on evidence-based practice. The project team included a nursing professor, a university librarian, nursing students, environmental/public health students, and staff from several disciplines within the health departments.
3. Decreasing re-admission rates for heart failure within a hospital. The team conducted a literature review and examined the current education and support provided to patients with heart failure at the hospital. In collaboration with staff members, action plans for patient and staff education were determined and will be evaluated. This project included two different teams of nursing students, three nursing professors who were content experts, biology students, and hospital nurses.

For such projects, faculty members identify students, “harness the energy of the students,” assist them in developing realistic project goals within the available timeframe, and provide expert guidance throughout the project. Students are recruited through classes, advisors, and other faculty members, but the majority of students have been recruited by current student-team members because they thought they would be strong team members and/or had expressed interest in research.

From trial and error, we have found that the teams are the most successful when there is effective communication and sharing of processes, progress, learning, and tasks. Frequent team meetings help cultivate this. Although faculty create student teams based on students’ interests and abilities, students also need to be available for regular team meetings (Moch, Quinn-Lee, Gallegos, and Sortedahl 2014). As one student reported, “I think that a big part of our team’s success comes from good communication. We are always all on the same page, and everyone knows what is expected of them. Everyone shares their findings and ideas and lets everyone know where others can help them out. It also works very well that we are able to meet frequently.”

## Benefits

The experience students gain from these academic-agency partnerships helps prepare them for their careers. Students have reported that they learned how to work collegially with fellow students, agency staff, and faculty. Students also gain personal insight and see connections between academic theory and real life. The benefits of interdisciplinary teams were explained by one student, who noted, "Our team worked very well together. Having two professors and a graduate student on the team also helped the group keep focus and kept us moving toward the goal. The interdisciplinary aspect of our group was a great strength because it contributed multiple different perspectives on topics."

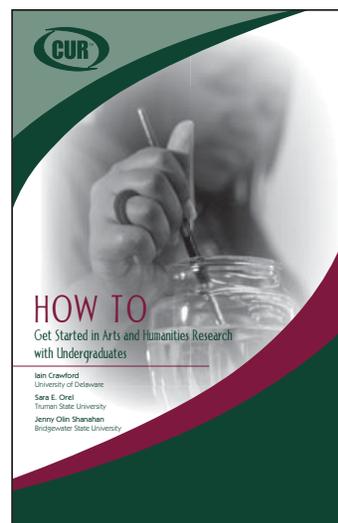
Faculty members benefit by maintaining a connection to current clinical issues and increasing opportunities for their own scholarship (Moch, Quinn-Lee, Gallegos, and Sortedahl 2014). In addition, the community agencies (Moch and Lonsdorf 2014; Moch et al. 2008) benefit by receiving up-to-date evidence and having an interdisciplinary team dedicated to working on an agency project. Agencies value the energy and new perspectives that students bring to the projects and also find the process helpful in preparing the future workforce while supporting academic-clinical partnerships. 

## References

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## A Practical, Hands-on Guide for Mentoring Undergraduates in the Arts & Humanities

Designed for faculty members and administrators hoping to develop opportunities for undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative work in the arts and humanities, the book contributes new ideas for meaningful student participation in the scholarship of these disciplines. Written by faculty members with long experience working with undergraduates, the book's eleven chapters offer models of successful practice in a wide range of disciplines and cross-disciplinary programs.



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