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CUR Focus

Engaging Students in Community-Based Research in Detroit

Abstract

The Detroit Community-Based Research Program (DCBRP) is a summer internship program run through the University of Michigan Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. The DCBRP matches students with community-based organizations in Detroit and offers them full-time research positions for ten weeks. Students conduct research projects initiated and identified by the organizations, addressing issues such as social and environmental justice, food security, human rights, urban development, public health, youth development, and sustainability. During the program students live together at Wayne State University in Detroit's Midtown neighborhood, attend weekly seminars taught by community partners about current topics affecting Detroit and the region, blog about their experience living and working in Detroit, and lead weekly group meetings to build a greater sense of community among program participants. Each year the program conducts exit interviews with students, and in summer 2015, 100 percent of respondents reported having a positive experience. The effectiveness of the DCBRP can be attributed to several factors, including the fact that students and community organizations benefit equally from the program, community partners are left with a tangible product at the end of the program, students live in the city where they are conducting research, and students take part who would otherwise not be able to participate in community work or summer programs due to financial restraints, contributing to a more diverse range of participants and a richer overall experience for all involved.

Introduction

The Detroit Community-Based Research Program (DCBRP) is a summer internship program run through the University of Michigan Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. The DCBRP matches students with community-based organizations in Detroit and offers them full-time research positions for ten weeks. Students conduct research projects initiated and identified by community based organizations in Detroit, addressing issues such as social and environmental justice, food security, human rights, urban development, public health, youth development, and sustainability. Students are awarded \$2,500-\$3,500, depending on financial

need, for participating in the program and transportation is provided. There is no cost to community organizations other than the time and mentoring required to host a student researcher.

The program begins with an orientation that allows students to meet one another before the program begins. It is designed to help them begin thinking about what it means to enter a community respectfully. The orientation also includes a panel of former student researchers so that new participants can hear from peers who have already been through the program. During the program students:

- live together at Wayne State University in Detroit's Midtown neighborhood.
- attend weekly seminars taught by community partners about current topics affecting Detroit and the region.
- blog about their experience living and working in Detroit.
- lead weekly group meetings to build a greater sense of community among the program participants.

The program concludes with an exhibition of student presentations and panel discussions attended by community partners, Detroit residents, and university faculty and staff. Students discuss what they learned about their research topic and Detroit over the summer and what they believe they were able to contribute to their organization.

During the weekly seminars mentioned above, our community partners present on current events in the Detroit area, giving students the context to understand the environments in which they are working. For example, in summer 2015 a senior organizer from the Detroit chapter of Food and Water Watch spoke about the water shutoffs that have plagued Detroit for the past two years, leaving many of the most vulnerable residents without access to water. A key takeaway for students last summer was that the vast majority of issues Detroit is currently dealing with are the result of the racial discrimination that continues to plague the city.

The program began in 1998 as a way to combine two high-impact educational practices: undergraduate research and service learning (Kuh 2008, 10-11). The program has gone through a variety of changes over the years, but since 2013

has operated under the current model. Students work exclusively with nonprofit and public organizations; this allows them to not only complete a research project, but also to experience what it is like to work in a community-based organization. Students are encouraged to take an active role at their placements, learning the challenges and opportunities their organizations face daily. They are not students for the summer, but full-time employees of the organizations in which they are placed. Without the added pressure and time commitment of coursework, students have ample time to explore and learn about Detroit. This structure means students have a research, internship, and community-service experience in one program, combining the power of three high-impact learning practices (Kuh 2008, 10-11).

The program's numerous goals include:

- Exposing students to the realities, both good and bad, of what is going on in Detroit.
- Giving students the opportunity to experience working in the community sector. In particular, we want students to gain an understanding of what it means to work in a community that is, in many cases, different from their own. We have a strong cohort of students from Detroit, but even they have been away from their neighborhoods while at school and are coming back with new experiences that may separate them from others in the community.
- Creating a diverse cohort of students, broadly defined (by race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, hometown, socioeconomic status, etc.), to introduce students to others who share an interest in social justice, community work, and/or Detroit (Table 1).
- Providing students with the opportunity to broaden and enhance their professional skills.
- Placing students with site supervisors who can provide mentoring and share their knowledge and experience working in the community sector and in Detroit.
- Contributing to capacity-building for organizations in Detroit that may have limited resources.
- Allowing students to work on a needed project that provides community partners with something useful at the end of each program cycle (documentary, reports, survey results, focus group results, data summaries, etc.).

Table 1. Student Profile, Detroit Community-Based Research Program

	2013	2014	2015
Total Number	21	20	24
Female	15 (71%)	16 (80%)	15 (62.5%)
Male	6 (29%)	4 (20%)	9 (37.5%)
Caucasian/White/European Descent	7 (33.3%)	10 (50%)	11 (45.8%)
Asian/Asian-American	6 (28.6%)	4 (20%)	0 (0%)
Black/African American	7 (33.3%)	4 (20%)	9 (37.5%)
Latino/Hispanic	1 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	2 (8.3%)
Middle Eastern/Arab American	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.2%)
Biracial/Multiracial	0 (0%)	2 (10%)	1 (4.2%)
First-Generation College Student	8 (38%)	7 (35%)	7 (29%)

What Makes this Program Successful?

While our community-based program has components that make it similar to other programs on the University of Michigan campus and across the country, we believe its effectiveness can be attributed to several factors:

- Students and community organizations benefit equally from the program.
- Community partners are left with a tangible product that they have sought at the end of the program.
- Students live in the city where they are conducting research.
- Students who would otherwise not be able to participate in community work or summer programs due to financial restraints can take part, contributing to greater diversity of participants and a richer overall experience for all involved.

Students and community organizations benefit equally. The DCBRP is designed to create engaged-learning experiences for students, but it is equally critical that community partners find participation beneficial. If our community partners do not have rewarding and fruitful experiences they will not continue with the program. Our community partners have continuously given us very positive feedback, however, and a good percentage come back each year (Table 2). The majority of cases in which community partners did not return have

Table 2. Community Partners, Detroit Community-Based Research Program*

2013	2014	2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chandler Park Promise Coalition Chiwara Permaculture Research & Education L3C Detroit 300 Conservancy Detroit Food & Entrepreneurship Academy Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation Detroit Public Schools Food System Economic Partnership Food & Water Watch Focus: HOPE Fresh Corner Cafe L3C Friends Of Parkside GenesisHOPE Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation InsideOut Literary Arts Project LAND, Inc Michigan Suburbs Alliance Nortown Community Development Corporation Peace, Immanuel, & Transfiguration Lutheran Churches Restaurant Opportunities Center of Michigan (ROC-MI) Sierra Club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 48203/HP Collaborative Detroit Food Academy Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation Detroit Public Schools Focus: HOPE FoodLab Detroit Food & Water Watch Friends Of Parkside Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation InsideOut Literary Arts Project Michigan Suburbs Alliance Neighborhood Service Organization Nortown Community Development Corporation. Southeast Michigan Regional Energy Office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Indian Health and Family Services City of Detroit, Mayor's Office Detroit Food Academy Detroit Future City Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation Detroit Public Schools EcoWorks Focus: HOPE Food & Water Watch FoodLab Detroit Friends Of Parkside Metro Matters (formerly Michigan Suburbs Alliance) Nortown Community Development Corporation Sierra Club Southeast Michigan Regional Energy Office Community Alliance Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision Summer in the City Voices for Earth Justice

*Organizations in bold type participated for at least two years.

typically been the result of our main contact leaving the organization. There have also been a small number of cases in which organizations were not invited to return due to students' having a less-than-optimal experience. Our program is based on the creation of reciprocal community-student relationships. When our students and community partners both have a positive experience with the program, we consider that a successful partnership.

Throughout the summer, students submit weekly timesheets and work plans. These serve as tools to help keep students on track given the relatively short time span of the research program. Every other week our community partners approve their student's timesheets, which include a space for them to comment on what the student is doing well and where there is room for improvement. In addition to check-in points throughout the program, at the end of each summer we ask our community partners to give us feedback through an exit survey.

Since the program started running under its current model, all the community partners that filled out the exit survey (14 organizations in 2013, nine in 2014, and eight in 2015) stated they would recommend the program to other organizations. Other questions on the exit survey include:

- How did having a research intern(s) benefit your organization?
- What was the final product produced by your student(s)?
- How will the research be used by your organization/community?

Organizations also give the DCBRP a large amount of informal, positive feedback through email and in-person interactions, particularly at our end of summer student exhibition.

Community partners help design the projects. The DCBRP is run on a community-driven research model, in which the participating organizations have a high level of control over the design and execution of the research project (Rowe and

O'Toole 2013). This is one of the keys to the program's impact and usefulness, as well as the philosophy of community engagement to which we adhere. Table 3 contains a selection of the questions and other information groups provide when they apply to the program. The information helps groups design their projects and think about what they can realistically expect a student to complete over the course of ten weeks. It also helps the DCBRP determine if the projected research is something a student can feasibly complete.

As an example of the type of project our students work on, an application in 2015 from the Detroit Food Academy (DFA) stated:

Detroit Food Academy is a youth-led leadership program that encourages young Detroiters to grow and explore by building their own community-focused food business. Too often, those served by organizations have little to no role in deciding how those programs are developed, implemented, or improved. To improve our organization, we are interested in learning from our students what they are getting out of

the program: What goals they set for themselves over the summer, reflection on how they are achieving these goals, best practices in programming and learning as identified by the students, suggested areas for growth/improvement. DFA hopes to gain more than valuable and usable insight from our young leaders as a part of this project: DFA hopes to establish a system of reflection, interviewing, and analysis that can be used and built upon during subsequent summers as well as during our year-round program.

Students live in the city where they are conducting research. The experience of living and working in Detroit, as opposed to just working there, gives students a deeper and more engaged learning experience. Having students living together also gives them the chance to form a tight-knit community and regularly share their experiences. Students who are from Detroit are given the option to live at home, but they are encouraged to live with the other participants at Wayne State and the majority did so in summer 2014 and 2015. Students often cite the ability to live in Detroit as a major highlight of the program and appreciate being able to venture into parts of the city with which they were unfamiliar. It is hoped that the time students spend in Detroit will make them more likely to continue working on regional issues during the remainder of their undergraduate years and beyond.

Student participants are diverse and enrich the experience. The student researchers are paid which benefits students who would otherwise not be able to participate in community work or summer programs due to financial restraints. This contributes to greater diversity among participants and a richer overall experience for everyone involved. Because of their knowledge and community connections, students from Detroit are actively recruited for the program. Further, in the summer of 2015 participants were split 50-50 between minority and majority students (Table 1), and the cohort also had a robust representation of first-generation college students at 29 percent (Table 1).

The DCBRP student profile is particularly important, considering that high-impact educational practices have an even greater effect on underrepresented students than on majority students (Kuh 2008, 17). Further, 62.5 percent of students in the 2015 program received the full stipend amount (\$3,500) from the program due to financial need, as demonstrated through a personal essay and the University of Michigan financial aid statement. The program also provides housing and covers the cost and arrangements for transportation for all students, which removes what could pose an additional barrier for some students.

Table 3. Selected Items from the Community Organization Application for the Detroit Community-Based Research Program

Briefly describe your organization.
Project description (please include the specific issue this project will address).
Briefly describe the neighborhood, community, or group that will be served by the proposed project.
What impact do you hope this research project will have on your organization/community?
What tasks will the student(s) work on for this project?
What prior skills/knowledge will the student(s) need to work on this project?
What do you expect the student(s) to complete by the end of the program? What will the final research product be?
Will this project involve interacting with community members?
In what capacity will the community interaction take place?
What skills/knowledge should the student(s) gain after completion of this project?
How will having this research intern benefit your organization?
What support/mentorship/supervision will you provide to the student(s)? Please be specific.

Students' Reactions

There are many ways to evaluate the impact a program such as this has on students. Since the program is still relatively new and students tend to participate early in their academic careers (11 of 24 students in the 2015 program were rising sophomores, seven rising juniors, and six rising seniors), we do not yet have a large cohort of former participants to assess. Thus the program currently relies heavily on qualitative feedback from students, such as exit interviews, to evaluate their experience and make changes based on their feedback.

Each week the students are given a blog prompt. Their subsequent posts provide invaluable insight into the impact the DCBRP has on them as students, people, and engaged citizens. During the first week of the program the prompt is: "Write a letter to yourself. This letter should address your expectations and what you hope to gain from the program, what you intend to contribute to your organization, as well as your current perception of Detroit."

During the first week students are often nervous and unsure what to expect from their experience. As the weeks progress, their confidence grows and they are better able to articulate their experience in Detroit and their knowledge of the communities with which they are working. In the final week of the program we ask students to revisit that first blog post using the prompt: "Read the letter you wrote to yourself in your first blog post and write a reaction to it. What have you learned? How have your perceptions or opinions changed? How have you evolved? Did your expectations meet reality?" See sidebar for an example of a student's final post.

The sidebar is an excerpt from the final blog post during the summer of 2015 from Laura Vincinanza, a rising sophomore from Atlanta, Georgia. Her words illustrate what we hope all students take from the program.

Conclusion

As noted above, each year program personnel conduct exit interviews with students to learn more about what they gained from the program and how the experience will inform their future plans. In summer 2015, 100 percent of students reported having a positive experience. One of the goals of the program is for students to see that living in Detroit and doing community-based work is a possibility after graduating. This program has a natural pull for students who are interested in nonprofit or social-justice careers, but it also attracts students who are interested in experiencing Detroit on a deeper level and native Detroiters who want to give back to their community.

During exit interviews, students who entered the program with plans to pursue a career in public service stated that their experience in the DCBRP enhanced this desire. Students

Week 10: A New Chapter by Laura Vincinanza

Well, reading over my initial letter to myself, I think that I have fulfilled most of what I wanted to accomplish this summer. I explored the city and its boroughs, made an impact in my organization, kept an open mind, and learned more about the socio-economic history of Detroit than I ever thought possible. Still, I could have explored more and there is still so much to learn!

Overall, the past 10 weeks have been very eye opening and humbling for me; eye opening because I have learned about atrocities that have happened in this city such as mismanagement, water shutoffs, and structural racial segregation; and humbling because this experience made me realize some of the things I often take for granted such as socio-economic advantage, legal status, and educational quality.

Detroit is an interesting place. Most people only see the tip of the iceberg, but THERE IS SO MUCH MORE BELOW THE SURFACE. There are so many amazing things happening in this city: revitalizations, community organizing, inclusive development and social change. Some people call Detroit a "blank canvas," but I think that negates the incredible people and places that are already thriving here. Detroit is more like a sturdy foundation for real positive change if policy-makers and investors can learn to include long-time Detroiters in their future plans for the city.

During my exit interview, Jenna asked me if I would consider moving to Detroit after graduation. I said maybe, if it didn't mean that I would be gentrifying. I wonder how white people can move back to the city without gentrifying? Will Southeastern Michigan always be as segregated as it is now? I still have so many unanswered normative questions regarding Metro Detroit and its changing dynamics. I hope to keep learning about the city and the region as I continue my collegiate studies.

I know that throughout college, I will encounter ignorance regarding the city of Detroit. I hope I have the courage to speak up when someone makes a racist/ignorant/naïve comment about the city or its residents. There is still so much work that needs to be done in Detroit, but I think that programs like the Detroit Community-Based Research Program can have a lasting positive impact in the city.

who did not enter the program with plans to pursue a non-profit career after graduation reported that this was now something they were more likely to consider. For example, several of our pre-medical students said they were now contemplating community medicine, public health, and the like. When asked, “Do you see yourself living and working in Detroit in the future?” 83 percent of students who completed the program said they either “definitely” or “maybe” see themselves living and working in Detroit. The students who responded “no” to this question all cited valid reasons, such as limited public transit (a student with a disability), not being a big city person, or lack of family in the area. All native Detroit students stated they intended to return to Detroit at some point after graduating.

While the feedback we have from community partners and students is primarily qualitative at this point, the positive reactions we have had indicates that the program is meeting the major program goals. In addition, we have seen growing interest from a diverse range of students at the university (92 applications for the 2016 program, up from 70 in 2015). We hope to continue the program with 24 students each year and include as many community partners as possible, while maintaining the integrity and quality of the program’s structure and partnerships. In the future, we look forward to following up with our DCBRP student alumni to see if the goals of encouraging more of them to work in Detroit and in the community setting are being met.

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