

Connecting Students to their Community: A Public Research Model of Service

In recent years a lively debate has been taking place regarding the effectiveness of community service and service learning in encouraging the political engagement of college and university students in the United States. Today's college students engage in unprecedented levels of community-service projects that provide them face-to-face experience with many of the nation's most difficult and enduring social problems. From working in shelters for battered women to the construction of homes in areas of rural poverty, college students have shared their time and abilities on their own initiative or as a part of class or institutional service-learning requirements. While participation in community service and volunteerism are generally well regarded in academe, as well as by the general public, the impact of these activities on students' political engagement appears questionable.

A number of early assessments give a generally discouraging report on the relationship between community service and political engagement, even suggesting that community service has become an alternative to politics (Galston, 2000). In their comprehensive study of civic education, Anne Colby and her colleagues (2003) noted that the focus on community engagement does not provide sufficient preparation for active citizenship, and they pointed to the need for more systemic political or policy-related understanding and engagement. Such studies indicate that while students have demonstrated a willingness to lend a hand in community efforts to cope with social problems, they tend to ignore the political context of, and policy-based solutions to, those problems.

While recognizing the shortcomings of direct service-learning and co-curricular service in promoting political activism and knowledge in students, we should not conclude that these activities need to be abandoned. Rather, what is needed is a renewed effort to more fully take advantage of research opportunities that engage students in venues that allow them to learn more about public policy. In addition, we need to create opportunities for undergraduate students to develop and utilize specific skill sets that are valued beyond the classroom. From designing and implementing public-opinion research projects to the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to conduct community-asset mapping, properly designed research projects can impart valuable skills to students that

fill substantial gaps in governmental and non-profit research efforts. Such projects also can be used to inform public decision makers and influence public policy.

In this article we explore promising new ways that undergraduate research can be used to complement and support policy development and service delivery at the municipal level, through what we call a *public research model of service learning*. Through well-designed research projects, we believe that service learning can help promote four broad objectives:

- 1) the development of students' civic capacities as community researchers;
- 2) the creation of more effective ties between the campus and the community;
- 3) the development of community resources; and
- 4) incentives capable of exerting leverage in the public life beyond the local community.

The public research model that we are proposing builds on these efforts to promote stronger communities, but it does so by focusing on the specific skills that can be gained through applied research. Such skills are potentially a powerful way of generating community building that can help meet the particular needs of non-profits and local governments. Examples of the model include the Lehigh Valley Research Consortium, a regional research center involving several academic institutions, and Muhlenberg College's Institute for Public Opinion, where students have used their research skills to supplement the work of local governments and non-profits in the Lehigh Valley.

The Lehigh Valley is located in the eastern part of Pennsylvania and is home to more than 600,000 individuals, 62 municipal governments, 17 school districts, and thousands of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. It is also home to six private four-year institutions, two community colleges, and a branch of the Pennsylvania State University. Over the last decade the region has experienced a surge in population, fueled by an influx of residents from metropolitan New York taking advantage of lower property taxes and cost of living. The region has also lost many manufacturing jobs and has undergone a move towards service-sector employment. The three cities in the

region, Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton along with smaller municipalities, have faced financial challenges and budget shortfalls. Further, the presence of multiple hospitals, non-profit groups, colleges, and government buildings in the region reduces the amount of property tax that can be collected. Thus government agencies are always struggling to deliver services and programs on very limited budgets.

With significant budget constraints, the local governments must focus their resources on delivering basic services to citizens. Other government functions that may involve research are usually sacrificed to meet more basic needs. Further, the many non-profit organizations in the region provide a wide array of supplemental service for residents. However, these organizations focus their spending on providing services, not on evaluating their programs or conducting assessments of needs. The absence of research by government agencies and non-profits places the entire region in a difficult position in delivering services in the most efficient manner. Are citizens satisfied with service delivery? What needs are going unmet? What are the greatest concerns of citizens and in what neighborhood are the concerns greatest? These are but a few of the key questions that often go unanswered because government agencies and non-profit organizations simply do not have the resources to answer them. While this situation is unfortunate, it also presents the perfect opportunity to harness the energies of undergraduates in conducting research that can help answer some of these questions.

In this public research model of service, then, we encourage the merging of student skill-building with the research needs of local governments and non-profits. This model requires a significant level of communication among officials and faculty members leading the research projects. For this model to be effective, it first requires researchers to be proactive in identifying the needs of the community. For example, a needs-assessment survey delivered to local government offices can be used as an initial measurement of the gaps in needed services. These needs can then be presented to a larger body of faculty members in the form of a clearinghouse to which professors can turn to identify possible overlap between the research needs of local government and the skills they are trying to develop in their students through coursework and other research projects.

After potential collaborations are identified, the individual professor should establish direct contact with personnel from the agencies in order to explore the tightness of fit between

the needs and academic assets. This stage of the process is crucial to discern the type of deliverable product that the agency is seeking. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this model of service learning is establishing confidence on both sides that the “deliverable” will be of an acceptable quality. While the students we are training possess numerous skills that are useful in meeting the needs of government, it is the professors who will play a significant role in assuring the ultimate quality of the deliverable.

Following are two cases in which undergraduates have been involved in research-oriented projects to inform the policy-making process.

Case Studies

First Case Study: The Lehigh Valley Research Consortium. The Lehigh Valley Research Consortium (LVRC) is a collaboration among academic institutions in the Lehigh Valley, which have joined to enhance the teaching and scholarship opportunities available on their campuses. The consortium was created to provide opportunities for faculty members and students to partner on research projects that address the growing needs and changing economy and demographics of the region.

Established in 2007, the goal of the LVRC is to act as a point of departure for examination of, and development of solutions for, social, political, economic, health, and environmental issues in the valley. The LVRC is faculty-created and faculty-driven. The team of faculty members building the consortium is interested in breaking down the traditional administrative and disciplinary silos of higher education in order to foster sharing of data and information, as well as partnering on local research projects and expanding teaching opportunities. The collaboration permits smaller colleges as well as larger universities to work jointly and build upon their individual assets, while strengthening learning opportunities for students.

Many of the institutions in the LVRC are small undergraduate colleges enrolling fewer than 5,000 students and employing fewer than 200 full-time faculty members. Collectively, however, these institutions provide a rich array of faculty members, technology, and infrastructure that can be harnessed for research. The LVRC is administered through the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC), which includes Cedar Crest College, DeSales University, Lafayette University, Lehigh University, Moravian College, and Muhlenberg College.

Two community colleges, Northampton Community College and Lehigh Carbon Community College, are also affiliated with LVAIC.

Students from across these institutions are hired as research assistants to work on policy-focused research projects. For example, four faculty members from two colleges (a political scientist, psychologist, nursing administrator, and business professor) are collaborating on a needs assessment of disabled residents in the Lehigh Valley. For this project, students from a nursing course, along with research assistants for each participating faculty member, developed focus-group protocols and administered, input data, and provided basic statistical analysis of the results of the needs assessment. Even though the students attended different colleges, they were able to coordinate the project and provide insights about the research to their faculty members and their peers. Students attend project meetings as well as communicating electronically. Students who worked on this project learned how to manage a research project, including survey distribution, data entry, and analysis using SPSS software.

Another research project involves students at three colleges who are working with faculty members to examine the local food economy of the Lehigh Valley. The Greater Lehigh Valley Buy Fresh Buy Local chapter hired the LVRC to investigate the extent to which valley farmers sold farm produce locally; the goal was to determine these farmers' contribution to the local economy. They also are interested in the extent to which local consumers "buy local." Working together, two economists and a biologist, along with students in a market research and a research methods, along with independent studies students are collaborating to address these questions.

The two economics professors built the project into their Market Research and Research Methods courses, while the biology professor advised three independent-studies students interested in environmental sustainability issues. Students in the Marketing Research class researched the consumption of locally grown foods at area restaurants and then developed marketing plans that incorporated the use of more locally grown foods. Students in the Research Methods class interviewed food distributors and large grocery store chains to learn about their food purchases. The independent-study students interviewed local farmers to identify the goods that are grown and produced locally and also distributed a survey and learned GIS software in order to map their results. The students'



Left: Research Assistant Cassy Bell manages the phones at the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion.

Bottom: Dr. Lanethea Mathews-Gardner, Principal Investigator for the Lehigh Valley Disability Study, works on surveys with Research Assistant Stephanie Siegel.



diverse research will be merged into a final report, with the project culminating in a meeting at which all of the students present their results.

A third example is the development and implementation of our community-based information system. Over the last two years, we have created a longitudinal data base that houses information on more than 300 indicators of community well-being (i.e., rate of violent crimes, high school graduation rates, per capita income). Students, working with the LVRC Project Director, assemble the data and prepare online reports presenting it. This one-of-a-kind information system contains indicators that are useful for area governments and non-profits as they prepare grant proposals measure performance, and evaluate public policies. This information system is also used for the preparation of the LVRC's annual State of the Lehigh Valley

report, which provides an update of measures concerning the valley's economy, education, public health, and public safety.

As these examples suggest, projects available through the LVRC provide an opportunity for students to develop their applied-research skills. Second, students are in constant contact with project clients, who are community representatives. Thus, students are able to build more meaningful relationships with members of the community, which reinforces the importance of their involvement in the research. Third, these projects provide a forum for students from different disciplines to learn from one another, encouraging their interdisciplinary interests and connections.

Second Case Study: The Institute of Public Opinion at Muhlenberg College. Like many small American cities, Allentown, Pennsylvania, has suffered a significant decline in its downtown during the past quarter century. The loss of key businesses, increases in crime, and deteriorating infrastructure have plagued the urban core of the municipality. Once a busy downtown with three large department stores, Allentown, the hub of retail activity in the region, has been reduced to empty storefronts and an increase in personal and property crime. The city government has worked hard to try and reverse the decline of the downtown district, but its activities have been limited because of limited information on citizens' perceptions regarding the problems and potential of downtown. Muhlenberg College's Institute of Public Opinion (MCIPO) partnered with the city on a research project that was designed to measure public sentiment regarding downtown Allentown.

The institute was created in 2001 as an undergraduate-run research organization with a mission of providing government and community organizations with high-quality public-opinion research. Other than guidance from the institute's faculty director, all research is conducted by undergraduates who are either interning or employed by the institute.

To produce the survey instrument in the Allentown project, undergraduates from the institute met with representatives of the city to discuss the goals of the research and to identify salient information required for design of the instrument. Including perceptions of crime, the economy and government service delivery. The undergraduate researchers worked with the city and the institute's faculty director to craft the technical aspects of the survey (sampling, question wording, and sequencing), and then pre-tested the instrument.

After the instrument was complete, the student staff managed the interviewing process and data collection. A team of three students at the institute conducted the data analysis. These students engaged in thorough examination of the data, including the identification of key relationships among types of citizens and their attitudes and behaviors related to the city's downtown.

Finally, the undergraduate staff developed and delivered the final product to the city. While the institute's director edited the final report, the undergraduates were responsible for presentation of the final document to members of city government, including council members and agency directors. The findings from the study were used extensively by the city in establishing revised policies for the city's redevelopment efforts.

The institutional stability of the institute allows for longer-term assessment of its research efforts. In particular, it can undertake multiple iterations of a survey project. During the year following the initial conduct of the downtown Allentown survey, the student staff (most of whom were part of the original project) met with city officials to discuss how the data had been used by the city and what information officials needed that was not produced by the survey. Through this assessment it was determined that the original project did not get enough information from individuals who lived outside of the city limits and that the next survey would require expansion of the sample. While this assessment provided students with a sense of how research needs evolve, it also confirmed that the research was being used by the government officials. This in turn validated the importance of the research to the students and helped engender in them a sense of seriousness about the work that they were doing.

Conclusion

The efforts to build public research service projects that link campus and town, as well as students, faculty members, and community and governmental leaders, offer an exciting new prospect for promoting political engagement among students. Anecdotal evidence gathered in informal exit interviews of students participating in the projects suggests that they view their community involvement in more sophisticated ways. For example, they gained a clearer understanding of the role of political and community leadership, budgetary constraints, and

the importance of reliable data in the formation of public policy. The next step we are planning includes a more systematic survey of the participating students' awareness of local issues, their interests and level of motivation, and their willingness to make longer-term commitments to local political and governmental organizations.

Linking undergraduate research and the formation of public policy deserves to be encouraged at institutions of higher education for an additional reason. As non-profit entities, most colleges and universities do not directly contribute to the tax base that funds local governments. But they may contribute in other ways to the community, especially by providing necessary research expertise to local governments, whose budgets often do not allow them to hire expensive research consultants. The specialized expertise of faculty members and students, applied through research-based community service, can be a very valuable resource for government agencies. While this article provides only a preliminary report on such research-based projects, we hope it encourages others to consider and design discipline-specific research that may provide a service to governments and local non-profits, and thereby stimulate more politically engaged service learning among our students.

References

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