A Practical Handbook for Supporting Community-Based Research with Undergraduate Students

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Council on Undergraduate Research
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Introduction

Colleges and universities around the country, aware of the benefits of community-based research (CBR) to their students, schools, and communities, increasingly are eager to incorporate CBR into their curricula and are seeking appropriate models and guidance. Numerous representatives from other colleges and universities have contacted us about starting or expanding CBR on their campus.

The conversations follow a similar progression and almost always contain the same questions:

- How do you get faculty involved?
- How do you work with community partners?
- How is the class structured, or how can a research question be incorporated into a class?
- How do you assess the results?
- How do you work with students?
- How do you ensure quality?
- How much funding is needed and where can resources be found?

This book is a practical reference that will help you initiate and support community-based research on your campus. It will outline the roles that an administrator or dedicated center can play in supporting undergraduate students conducting CBR projects. It expands on the practical information contained in Community-Based Research in Higher Education: Principles and Practices (Strand et al. 2003). We will outline the processes, methodology, and challenges of institutionalizing CBR, including details on budgeting, staffing, cultivating partnerships with community organizations, and troubleshooting.

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Based Learning Initiative and The Bonner Foundation, and funded by a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service’s Learn and Serve America program. We received invaluable support from Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service.

This handbook is designed to guide colleges and universities in the process of engaging undergraduates in community-based research. Undergraduates often lack specific research skills or expansive knowledge about communities and social theories. However, they have a great deal of interest in solving social problems, creating social change, engaging with people outside of their campus settings, learning new ways to be active citizens, and engaging in intellectual discourses that have concrete outcomes. They often are excited about the possibility of doing each of these things for academic credit, and courses provide the platforms, oversight, and opportunities for engaging in all of these activities.

Integrating CBR into a class changes the nature of both the course and the coursework. Courses that historically have been theoretical in nature must grapple with issues involved in applying the subject matter, a challenge familiar to proponents of undergraduate research. Faculty members engage more deeply with the local community and their students in the process. Guiding students and helping them reflect on their community requires more work. Further, campus communities and their surrounding local communities are often segregated physically (e.g., with fences and walls), socioeconomically, and socially. Integrating the two communities requires additional skills, resources, and time, as well as dedicated staff to shepherd the process.

Therefore our goal here is to provide a roadmap for several components of implementing CBR with undergraduates.

- In the first section we address the definition of CBR and why we conduct it.
- In the second section, we lay out a process for conducting CBR. We include chapters on developing and maintaining partnerships, developing research questions, understanding methods and analysis, and reporting findings. Please note that these sections are not prescriptive, but rather are focused on the issues to consider when engaging in these components of CBR projects.
- In the third section, we focus on some practical facets of institutionalizing CBR, addressing how to raise funds, recruit faculty, and put in place the resources needed to implement CBR across the campus.

Each chapter ends with “Key Practical Questions.” You can focus on the questions that make sense for a particular project or use the questions as a guide to identify things you must think through before implementing CBR.