

ELIZABETH L. PAUL Downtown

A Community-Campus Collaborative Course to Prepare Students for Community-Based Research

THE BONNER SERIES ON
STUDENT
CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT

The Bonner Foundation engages students in an intensive, developmental, four-year, service-based scholarship and civic engagement program. Seventy-five colleges and universities are currently working to build and sustain an integrated cocurricular and curricular model for campus civic engagement.

With support from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), many of these campuses have or are creating a parallel academic initiative in the form of a civic engagement certificate, minor, or concentration.

Articles in this series feature Mars Hill College (Stanley Dotson), Washington and Lee University (Harlan Beckley), and the College of New Jersey (Elizabeth Paul).

For additional information and resources, including frameworks, campus profiles, practitioner how-to essays, and more, see www.bonner.org or the AAC&U publication

Civic Engagement at the Center: Building Democracy through Integrated Cocurricular and Curricular Experiences (forthcoming 2008), which presents the model along with strategies for developing an in-depth academic initiative.



THE TRENTON YOUTH Community-Based Research Corps (TYCRC) at the College of New Jersey engages undergraduate students in research that helps make a difference in the lives of children—particularly those living in poverty. The students and I partner with nonprofit social service agencies that lack the resources to hire external researchers to conduct community needs and assets assessments or to study the effectiveness of their programs. Such research is increasingly necessary for the economic survival of nonprofit community-based organizations, not to mention for developing effective programs and services.

Initially, TYCRC was a one-semester course in community-based research (CBR) methods in which students completed a small “demonstration” project. This was a familiar pedagogical model that comfortably allowed me to experiment with engaging undergraduates in CBR. Yet after attempting CBR within the constraints of a single course, I quickly realized the necessity of extending the length of the program beyond one semester. The periodicity of a semester constrains learning to particular times (and typically to particular contexts) and is mismatched with the real-time and real-world nature of CBR.

TYCRC is now a three-semester program, achieved in partnership with the Bonner Foundation’s initiative for creating multi-semester civic engagement certificates, minors, or concentrations. Students first enroll in a course that grew out of lessons learned about the preparation needed to support students in engaging meaningfully in intense urban CBR projects. The majority of students involved in TYCRC have had little or no exposure to the

realities of inner-city children and families living in poverty. While many have had well-intentioned community service experiences, the students were frequently sheltered from up-close exposure to the hard realities of social injustice and rarely engaged in meaningful reflection to deepen their understanding. Thus, initial exposure to these realities and awareness of the mission and strategies of community organizations is necessary for preparing students for the CBR partnership. My challenge was to prepare TYCRC students for yearlong CBR partnerships in which they accomplish major research projects with and on behalf of their community partners.

Three students work on each CBR project; this small-team approach allows for collaboration and support among students as well as manageability in terms of project organization and communication. Students are assigned to CBR teams based on their interests and work habits. I establish the initial partnership with the community organizations and have preliminary conversations about their research needs. Students then join the partnership, and the mutual work of defining and executing the CBR project begins with a discussion of the agency’s research needs. The students and faculty spend time getting to know the agency by holding all meetings at the agency, and students volunteer time in helping roles at the agency. The students, with input from other partners, conduct professional literature searches to further inform the research questions.

Once the objectives of the research are clearly defined, a realistic research design is defined, measures and data collection methods are designed, and study implementation logistics are planned. Research ethics are reviewed by the institutional review board of either the community organization (if available) or the college. Students are instrumental in

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administering the data collection process, and they take the lead in statistical analysis and the presentation of results. The full partnership participates in discussing and interpreting results, and in developing recommendations for the agency based on the results. When appropriate, focus groups are held with clients of the agency to gain their perspectives. The agency defines the most useful format for reporting study results. Typically, agencies request a formal research report as well as a presentation for agency staff, the board of directors, and sometimes clientele. Students are the primary authors of the research report, with substantial input on multiple drafts from all partners.

**“Downtown . . .
everything’s waiting for you”**

To prepare TYCRC students for rigorous CBR projects, I developed a course entitled Downtown: Inner-City Youth and Families. The name of this course was inspired in part by Petula Clark’s classic rendition of “Downtown” in which she croons, “and you may find somebody kind to help and understand you. Someone who is just like you and needs a gentle hand to guide them along. . . . So go downtown, things’ll be great when you’re downtown—don’t wait a minute more, downtown—everything’s waiting for you.” This classic 1960s tune celebrates the wonders of urban life. The Downtown course takes a wide-eyed look at the harsh realities of inner-city poverty, while also appreciating the assets and strengths of inner-city residents.

The learning objectives for the Downtown course include (1) providing exposure to and stimulating awareness of the complex lives of inner-city youth and families, particularly those who live in poverty; (2) viewing real-life urban complexities—needs and assets—through multiple lenses, including both disciplinary and community-based perspectives; (3) building the cultural competency skills necessary for working with and on behalf of inner-city youth and families; (4) developing understanding of

social services, and gaining comfort interacting with community professionals; and (5) gaining familiarity with and comfort in traveling around Trenton. It is expected that, upon completion of this course, students are poised to engage fully in a collaborative CBR partnership.

Downtown is a “course within a course”; it is a community course within a college course. Students enrolled in Downtown also partake as citizen participants in the Trenton Community Orientation Course (TCOC), an eight-session program designed to foster youth advocacy skills in concerned citizens. TCOC is a collaboration of the Association for Children of New Jersey, Millhill Child and Family Development Corporation, the City of Trenton, and TYCRC. Other participants are typically adult social service professionals, retired citizens interested in finding volunteer opportunities, or philanthropists wanting to learn more about Trenton’s needs and assets. Each session focuses on a different issue (e.g., child abuse and neglect, education) and meets at a local social service agency. TYCRC students learn in situ about pressing inner-city issues; they get to know many Trenton citizens; they learn through observation, interaction, and testimonials about Trenton youth and families; they learn about numerous social service agencies—including their economic pressures; and they develop familiarity with and comfort in traveling to Trenton. These community sessions are complemented by class sessions at the college that include reflection, relevant social science readings, and discussion with area professionals about urban youth issues and the role of research in social service agencies.

Each TCOC session includes continuing team-building activities and interactive exercises that challenge stereotypes and build awareness of privilege and prejudice. But the primary focus is on a particular social issue: What is the challenge? How does the community respond to the challenge (services, resources)?



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What can we do to help (both in terms of direct service and youth advocacy)?

Sessions also include lunch, providing opportunities for more informal conversation among TCOC participants and facilitators. TYCRC students are encouraged to sit with non-student TCOC participants—a tall challenge at first. At an early campus session of Downtown, we brainstorm about conversation starters to facilitate their interaction. I encourage honest discussion of the stereotypes we hold of various sectors of TCOC participants,

and I prompt conversation about the stereotypes we presume non-student TCOC participants hold of us. This evolves into discussion of the dynamics of privilege and social status, town-gown relations, and ways in which stereotypes sometimes seem to hold a “kernel of truth” but can be challenged and eroded. Making an effort to get to know individuals—identifying common interests, but also appreciating individuality—is a powerful strategy for weakening the prejudicial power of stereotypes.

Students’ major assignment in the Downtown course is to complete a community agency-sponsored “Issue Investigation”—an in-depth analysis of an issue in which a community agency is interested. Examples of Issue Investigations include a study of feelings of hopelessness among contemporary urban youth, curriculum development for a new life skills and mentoring program for urban teenage girls, and brainstorming about ways to stimulate healthy peer relationship development among urban youth.

Issue Investigations require students to work with community partners to define an issue of interest and to articulate the community agency’s need or potential uses for the information. Students must have a series of conversations with community partners, learn about the mission and goals of the organization, and think strategically about the organization’s work. The projects require students to search and consult various sources of information, including scholarly research, demographic and other public data, information on relevant programs in other parts of the country, policy positions and research, and information gleaned through interviews or focus groups with native informants. The Issue Investigations also give the students something purposeful to talk about with adult TCOC participants. Finally, Issue Investigations give students a taste for doing something “real”—with real importance, real relevance, and real impact.

Learning outcomes and the impact of the TCOC course

Assessment of the Downtown course includes surveys of civic attitudes and behaviors administered to all TCOC participants before and after the course; written reflections of all TCOC participants about the course experience, including the experience of interactions between campus and community participants; and more extensive written reflections of all TYCRC participants throughout the course.

Comparisons of participants' survey responses before and after the TCOC reveal several significant differences. (Student and non-student participants did not differ in these results). Most participants gained greater self-efficacy—particularly a sense of being effective in the community. Participants showed greater understanding of social problems and reported engaging more often in civic activities. Participants reported participating less frequently in fundraising events, but they more often performed volunteer work, participated in activities that help to improve their community, and encouraged others to participate in community service. Participants also reported that TCOC inspired them to work on behalf of children and gave them a specific idea about how they can work on behalf of children. Participants' written reflections brought these findings to life.

Exposure

All TYCRC students reflected on how widely their eyes had been opened by their participation in TCOC and Downtown. An important function of the on-campus Downtown class sessions was debriefing on the realities to which the students had been exposed in the TCOC sessions. This created a critical supportive space in which to share observations, express surprise and even shock, and begin to fold this awareness into their widening sense of reality. For many of the students, reflections on the realities to which they were exposed led to deepening understanding of life experiences and communities different from their

own. I have also come to appreciate the transformative power of Downtown for students who have grown up in urban environments and who are very familiar with the challenging realities of inner-city life.

We spend considerable time in Downtown sessions discussing the many factors that conspire to create the complex issues for youth in the inner-city—child neglect and abuse, early substance use and abuse, gang involvement and violence. My goal is to complicate students' often simplistic or "pat" theories or answers to these problems. We consider many different sources of information and different perspectives. Another shift I try to engineer is from individual attributions for the cause of these problems ("they are just lazy") to consideration of external factors such as poverty, prejudice, privilege, and power. We also discuss the tendency toward simplified and homogeneous beliefs about "outgroups," people we see as different or removed from ourselves, as well as the societal function of simplistic, external stereotypes and assumptions.

Some of the most powerful and insightful experiences come when TYCRC students interact personally with Trenton youth. I collaborate with Trenton leaders to plan and implement Trenton Teens Talk youth forums on pressing issues. One of these biannual forums coincides with Downtown, and so I involve TYCRC students in the event. Nearly one hundred Trenton youth from the local public high school, alternative high school, YouthBuild site, and youth detention center come together and participate in guided discussion. The event starts with a brief motivational presentation, typically delivered by a Trenton native in his or her twenties or thirties, emphasizing the power of youth voices in shaping the promise of the future.

The forum is comprised of four or five twenty- to thirty-minute sessions, each posing a thought-provoking question to stimulate small-group conversation. A facilitator gently keeps the conversation on track and documents

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the youths' feedback. At the close of each session, the youths' responses are sent to a "theme team" that compiles all responses and creates a report in real-time during the forum. Each participant leaves with a copy of the report, and the report is distributed widely to community leaders. The youth feedback, insights, and ideas included in these reports have led to specific school and community changes and initiatives.

Each TYCRC student joins one of the small groups at the forum. They not only observe the youths' discussions, but they also eat lunch side by side with the youths and get to know them as real people. Participation in the youth forum is a turning point in Downtown, stimulating movement from exposure to growing understanding.

Deepening understanding brings new challenges for the students. They realize that once their eyes have been opened to complex and sometimes painful realities, it is impossible to close them again. As they shed protective ignorance, they come face-to-face with civic responsibility—no longer as an externally imposed "should," but instead as a personal mandate. This is the most difficult time during the entire three-semester TYCRC program. When I sense that some of the students are nearing this point, I discuss my own experience of

getting to this realization and encourage them to reflect and talk. I also invite individuals from the Trenton community to join us for personal reflection about their own paths to civic engagement and responsibility. This is the time to talk about building "citizenship" into identity.

Community building

Downtown ends with a TCOC graduation ceremony held in May at City Hall, where the mayor of Trenton and other community leaders address the graduates. All TCOC graduates receive a certificate and a collection of local resource guides and memorabilia. This is a day of pride, accomplishment, and inspiration. TCOC participants reunite in June at the statehouse for a state advocacy day sponsored by the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ). This is a warm reunion, reflecting the camaraderie developed among all participants. Most student participants return to Trenton to attend the day's events. Participants observe an ACNJ press conference on a recent policy issue regarding children, attend a committee meeting, and interact with policy makers, lobbyists, and other community leaders.

As TYCRC students move from this first-semester experience into their yearlong CBR project, their TCOC experience helps make

Trenton feel like a “small world.” Having traveled to many different parts of the city, walked the streets with other citizens, learned about the real-life experiences of residents, and met inspirational social service providers, TYCRC students begin to feel like part of the community.

Action

A key aim of TCOC is to stimulate advocacy efforts on behalf of children. A very broad sense of advocacy is promoted, including such actions as interacting one-on-one with youth, registering concern about a youth issue with a local leader or state politician, serving as a youth advocate, or committing to advance a cause through activism or community leadership. Students’ issue investigation is an advocacy effort, of course, but students are also encouraged to participate in other advocacy actions with TCOC participants. Through these targeted service efforts, TCOC participants are drawn into the community, working side by side with diverse residents.

Perhaps the best outcome of Downtown is the “fire” it sparks in the students. Students emerge from Downtown burning to start their CBR project! They approach the yearlong partnership with enthusiasm, a sense of purpose and belief in their efficacy, an openness to and respect for their community partners, and pride in working in Trenton.

Conclusion: Implementing a developmental program

In TYCRC, students learn to be partners, citizens, and public scholars. They internalize a civic identity, recognizing both that they are part of social systems and dynamics of power and privilege, and that they can be agents of social change. And they learn that research can be a tool for strengthening community agencies and for prompting social change. Developing these identities takes time and gradually deepening experiences, support and challenge, and reflection and discussion—far

more than can be accomplished in a single course in a single semester.

Implementing a developmental program poses challenges, including cost and role definition issues. While the course objectives of Downtown may enable a larger class size, I need to be sensitive to the balance of students and non-students in the TCOC course, which involves about thirty participants each year. The primary facilitator of this course and I decided that the majority of participants (ideally about two-thirds) should be non-students. Consistent with this limit, I have found that twelve students—four teams of three students—is a manageable class size in the yearlong CBR phase, based on our efficacy in meeting community needs and in facilitating productive work team dynamics.

Carrying a course with a relatively small class size across three semesters can challenge the economics of course scheduling. On the surface, the cost-benefit ratio may not seem to warrant support of the effort. I also strive for an interdisciplinary group of students. Addressing real-life issues benefits from multiple perspectives and skill sets. Thus, recruitment efforts are campus-wide, and every cohort has included students majoring in highly disparate areas.

All individuals involved in TYCRC face challenges to the traditional definitions of their roles. Students accustomed to passive learning in a classroom are stretched to embrace active learning in the community. Faculty too must step outside of the contained classroom to collaborate with many other “teachers” and to join as learners. The experience is demanding, and it becomes intense and even all-consuming at certain phases of the developmental process. All must broaden the scope of their learning goals to include personal development. □

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