

Working In and For the Community: A Reflection of Community-Based Research

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As a sophomore at the University of Pittsburgh, I was given the opportunity to conduct independent research under the guidance of a faculty mentor. The Community-Based Research Fellowship is awarded through the University of Pittsburgh Honors College. The fellowship gives students the opportunity to partner with a community organization and a faculty mentor to complete a research project that will provide meaningful benefits to both the community partner and the undergraduate researcher. The goal of the fellowship is to facilitate social change through working with a community organization; I worked with Pittsburgh Action Against Rape.

Through the fellowship, I learned about what it means to work with an organization, to do community work, and to do research. Prior to this fellowship, I had only ever volunteered; I had not worked closely on a project with an organization's staff. I learned what it means to go out into the community and I saw the people that PAAR is helping everyday. The good work the agency is doing is apparent in the effort the staff puts into each program, including Parents in the Know. Without PAAR, programs like this wouldn't exist.

Preventing sexual assault is something I personally care about. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and a past recipient of services at PAAR. PAAR's legal advocacy and counseling services helped me through an extremely difficult time in my life and I was always impressed with the great work of these programs. However, my hope is to prevent abuse from occurring in young children's lives so that they never have to experience the pain and hardships of the aftermath of abuse. Seeing PAAR's prevention team and working on this project has given me great hope in the ability to prevent abuse, and to still provide relief for those we can't protect.

Growing as a researcher has been an excellent experience. Doing independent work with the guidance of seasoned faculty mentors allowed me to truly learn about the research process. I discovered the ups and downs of doing research, the hardships and benefits of working with a community partner, and the struggles and successes of taking on such a big project. I learned to be professional and how to have a successful meeting. I learned how to develop relationships with people before asking them to participate in my research. I learned how to ask for help and when to carry on without it. I learned how to analyze my results and how to think critically when they don't turn out as expected. I learned how to do what the agency wants and not just what I want. And finally, I learned how to commit to a project and work to make it the best that it can be for both me and the agency.

The service-learning orientation of the Community-Based Research Fellowship was unique and especially important to me throughout the process. The fellowship fostered an attitude of always putting the needs of the community first. When selecting a project, it was very important that the topic be something that the community organization supported and was an issue that it wanted solved; it was not acceptable to go to the organization and propose a project that it may not have wanted to do. The fellowship staff urged all of the fellows to meet with the community organization and discuss issues that were important to both parties. This aspect of the fellowship allowed me to see what it means to work with a community partner. The project I chose was something PAAR cared about and an issue in which it wanted to see positive change.

The fellowship also provided a unique opportunity to work with other students in an interdisciplinary context. Fellows came from many different majors and years with projects varying in scope and depth. Although many aspects of our projects were different, we all had a common goal: to work with a community organization to help solve an important issue. We met biweekly to discuss what it means to do service-learning research. We had reading and journaling assignments to ensure we were actively thinking about the challenges we inevitably faced throughout the research process.

For me, these discussions and readings were extremely important for my understanding of service learning. I have always been passionate about social change and improving the welfare of others, which is why I decided to become a social worker. However, having never worked alongside a community organization, I did not realize the complex nature of doing community-based research. I believed it was as simple as finding an issue and fixing it with the typical research design. I did not take into account the complex relationships I would experience in not only working with the community partner, but the community member as well. Through my research project last semester, I learned the importance of relationship-building before doing research with people in the community. It was important to get to know the parents I was working with before I started to ask them sensitive questions. I was lucky to be working with a group of parents who already knew each other and had excellent group cohesion. Had this not been the case, I would have needed to have spent even longer building the relationships within the group to ensure everyone was comfortable before I began my research. Furthermore, relationships with my community partner were extremely important. I learned that I was a team member, but I needed to respect PAAR's mission and the goals the staff had. It was important for me to put my project in the context of the organization's current state and overall mission and values.

I feel very fortunate that my first experience in research was in service-learning research with a community-centered fellowship. As a social work major, any research I do will be centered on the community and the people I am working with. Learning the importance of respecting these people and putting their needs first was an important lesson. Had I simply done an independent study without the service-learning foundation, I may have centered my research around my own needs and wants, instead of the needs and wants of the community I was working with. I learned the importance of taking into account both parties' interests and using the shared interests as a strength within the research framework and development of the project. Once I talked to PAAR, it was easy to see that we had common goals in mind and I could tailor the research to fit both my needs and PAAR's. Furthermore, I gained this collaborative experience while also researching my topic independently while under the guidance of a faculty mentor. This guidance allowed me to use evidence-based research methods and to not miss any important steps throughout the process. I would not have understood the research process had I not been working so closely with my faculty mentors, as well as the other fellows and fellowship staff.

I hope to continue doing research to help community organizations improve their programs and services. I think research-based initiatives that are evidence-based allow for the best care and treatment for individuals in the community. Service learning is an excellent way to experience this type of research for the first time. Even if students are not going into research that centers on social change or human populations, I think it is still important to understand the value of taking into account the needs of communities and any other group you may work with while researching. Service-learning is important for understanding the goals and needs of others

so you can better understand how you can tailor your research to meet those goals and needs, as well as your own.

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