

It's Not Always about the Final Product: The Challenges and Rewards of Community-Based Research

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My undergraduate career has instilled in me a passion to serve the community. At Warren Wilson College engaging in service is a graduation requirement, but for me it evolved into a personal commitment to be involved in my community. I have worked closely with many community partner organizations. Over the last three years I have engaged in direct service, completed a summer internship, coordinated event planning, participated in a strategic planning committee, and facilitated service opportunities through communication with community partners. My service experiences have informed the direction of my future career plans, enhanced my academic learning, and drawn me closer to people in the community.

Based on the variety of ways in which I have engaged in service, I eventually felt I was ready to tackle a sustained relationship with a community partner. As such, I approached the idea of a community-based research project with confidence. This confidence was short lived, as I soon found that I had underestimated the challenges of conducting community-based research. Despite these challenges, I now feel even more strongly about the importance of developing and completing community-based research projects.

From the fall of 2013 through the spring of 2014, I conducted a research project in partnership with two nonprofit organizations on the psychological effects of being a family caregiver. I began this research as a course within my psychology major. While most of my peers chose college students as their participants, my interests in psychology were focused on older adults. With very limited resources allotted for my research, much like all undergraduate research, I was prompted to utilize community partner connections to reach the older adult population. I decided to complete a community-based research project not just to access participants, but because I wanted this research to serve a purpose beyond course credit. In this way, the research felt more meaningful and gave me strong motivation to dedicate my time to the project.

After discussing my research interests with multiple people, I was connected with the Aging Coordinating Consortium, a committee with a five-year strategic plan to improve aging in Buncombe County, NC. The committee invited me to a meeting to see how my research interests might align with the goals of its strategic plan. Simply sitting in on one of the meetings was a greater learning experience than quite a few of my academic courses. I was in a room with people dedicated to solving the issues I felt most passionate about. It was a truly inspiring experience just to be in the same room with them.

The research question was developed based on these agencies' need to know more about the family caregivers in the area. By aligning my time and energy with the needs of this committee, I served a real function in moving the strategic plan forward. I attended multiple meetings in order to fine tune and communicate my research objective and procedures for reaching it. One of the first challenges in this process was the fact that the group met only once a month, during one of my classes. This foreshadowed a persistent challenge throughout this project, which was staying on schedule with my course deadlines while not imposing on my community collaborators' time.

The Council on Aging of Buncombe County and CarePartners, two members of the Aging Coordinating Consortium, offered to collaborate with me on research focused on family caregivers. Developing the research procedures required many phone calls, emails, and visits to these two nonprofit organizations. This was particularly challenging because I was trying to synthesize different sources of input with my own ideas for how to assess family caregivers. It was often difficult to make decisions because of the conflicting ideologies at play. For example, based on my academic training in psychology I leaned toward quantitative research methods instead of qualitative methods. Looking back, I wish I could have spent more time collaborating with my community partners to develop my research plans, without the pressure of my course timeline. With more intentional conversations around their needs as nonprofits, I might have gotten a better understanding of the value of qualitative interviews for their purposes.

Additionally, while I was motivated by the idea of giving back to the community, this was a daunting project due to the scale of the strategic plan. The Aging Coordinating Consortium's plan addresses the needs of the entire county, but because of limited resources and time I had to shrink the scale of the research. In addition, collaborating with my community partners was much more time intensive than I expected and required many more firm decisions from me than I had anticipated. Reflecting on this, I think I had assumed that the community partners would provide a clear direction for the research rather than the wide scope of issues they presented. This gave me some freedom in developing my research, but was also overwhelming.

Furthermore, differing ideologies around research complicated my decision making about which aspects of family caregiving to assess. The Aging Coordinating Consortium and the two community partners often urged me to assess levels of depression in family caregivers. However, I was more interested in psychological well-being, which, unlike depression, has not been well studied in the literature surrounding family caregivers. It appears well documented in previous research that most caregivers are burdened by the role to at least some degree. A gap exists in research regarding the benefits or positive experiences associated with the caregiving role. Thus, navigating between what I thought might best serve the needs of the community and what my community partners saw as being in their best interests was a great learning experience. Navigating these conflicting ideas was further complicated by the additional pressure of conducting research for an academic course in the discipline of psychology. I found myself relying on my own initiative and communicating with my community partners succinctly in order to move the project forward on pace with my timeline.

One of the most important lessons I took away from this experience is the value of adaptability. Many times I found myself wondering what the next step was, or what the community partners would need from me next. There were no procedures or guidelines for how to make this project come to fruition. In the beginning it frustrated me to have no structure, but ultimately it forced me to adapt to the needs of my collaborators.

One of the key moments when I had to learn to adapt was when the research study struggled to recruit participants. My intention when I began this community-based research project was to give back to the community. I had high hopes for how this research could be beneficial, but when only eleven caregivers participated, I had to adjust my strategies and my expectations. Through this process I learned which methods were more and less successful at reaching the family caregiver population. I may not be able to present clear results on the experiences of family caregivers to the Aging Coordinating Consortium, but I believe that learning this was a step forward.

Throughout this process of collaboration I was looking for a model to follow or guidelines for next steps. Now I realize that trying to organize the process of community-based research into a rigid model might limit the diversity of the opportunities for knowledge development. I found that I could develop a model based on my experience, but just as each community partner differs, so does the process of collaboration. As long as one approaches the community partner with humility and is ready to adapt, I feel that a project can be successful.

Overall, this experience significantly increased my skills in communicating and adapting. More importantly, it challenged me to reevaluate what it means to work with a community partner and what it means to do community-based research. I now have a greater appreciation for the hard work and commitment that community partners contribute to a project like this. It is not a simple task to volunteer for a community-based research project but I am grateful my community partners dedicated their time. I learned that sometimes a project is still successful even if the initial goals are not met; a collaboration has been created and a partnership developed.

I know now that the value of community-based research is in the process of community collaboration itself. I learned much more about the community, community partners, and myself by working through the challenges of conducting this research than I had ever hoped for. When I began this project I was looking for a way to serve a purpose in my community and I now feel that working with the community in this sustained way has renewed my sense of purpose to engage in service. For me, the bottom line is that it's not always about the final product of community-based research, sometimes it's about coming together to learn through the process.

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