

Impact of Action Research at a Local Homeless Organization

Emily Roberts
Coe College

My community-engaged research project was conducted in the context of an Action Research course, facilitated through the Coe College Scholar's Program. Previously, the course was taught in Coe's education department at the graduate level where the research focus was on the local K-12 school district. Due to both a need expressed by several community partners to complete survey research and an increasing demand from Coe students to work in and with their community, this undergraduate Action Research course was formed as a pilot project. Three main objectives of the course were to: introduce the principles of action research on the undergraduate level, allow College Scholars to be leaders in building research partnerships with local non-profits, and teach students about the impact of action research in a community-engaged context. In the academic portion of the course, we completed readings from our textbook and conducted discussions on our readings within the class of six students. The course was centered on a large-scale investigative research project and culminated with presenting our findings both to our community partners and to the campus community.

Action research is a cyclic process of organized inquiry that is completed in a collaborative way. No longer separate, the "researcher" and "client" must work as one to understand the situation, identify problems, and find solutions. This empowering, participatory process can be easily focused on community needs, which was the focus of this course. Rather than applying the action research framework to a for-profit entity, our class elected to apply our coursework in the community on systematic inequalities. A crucial piece of this undertaking was to listen to community needs. The course faculty member partnered with Coe's Director of Community Engagement to identify non-profits with research questions. Potential community partners were identified, and the organizations sought out our course in response, replying that they would be interested in partnering with students. This community reciprocity was important to ensure our projects would be related to real questions in the community that needed to be answered, an important aspect of community-based research. Each of the six students in our class was offered potential projects, and each of us chose a nonprofit organization in the community to partner with based on the fit and our personal interests. My chosen project was partnering with a local community center that aids in the fight against hunger and homelessness.

I took this course because I aspire to do research with biostatistics. I entered the process with a strong interest in research, data, and human behavior, only having previous experience with empirical research. As a math and psychology major familiar with scientific, quantitative methods, I did not realize the significance of this type of research. I knew this course would offer a new perspective, perhaps widening my view while looking at data, as action research is less commonly used in the scientific realm. I entered the course with the traditional expectations of number crunching, required readings, presentations, and a final grade. However, it soon became so much more than that. The value of action research as a legitimate method to help the community became apparent. Trying to improve the efficacy of an organization and help people who are suffering is no small feat, especially not having had personally dealt with the issues at hand. Engaging myself in the complexity and delicacy of this organization was as fascinating and challenging as other coursework. In this community-based project, I was no longer the "researcher," but a participant. No longer looking for a significant likelihood in a set of data, I

was looking to make a viable difference in the lives of those at the organization and in the community at large. Fortunately for me, I was paired with an organization that made as much of an impact in my life as I hope I have for them. I now understand the value of community-based research. This has allowed me to view research from a different perspective and motivates me to do research that directly benefits people. It is evident that research with the community has the potential to be just as impactful as empirical research.

My community-based research landed at the intersection of hunger and homelessness. Working with Mission of Hope has been an opportunity to understand, but more importantly, witness how the Cedar Rapids community is being served. Partnering with this assemblage brought its challenges. My first hurdle was recognizing the complexity of building trust with all members of the community. Typically, the clients of Mission of Hope are anonymous and relatively transient. This creates difficulty when building trust, which is necessary to have personal conversations about homelessness and needs. This process was further complicated with my presence as a young, female student from a private college. It was important to convey to clients my intentions in surveying and interviewing them. My goals were to find answers to questions not yet realized and stimulate needed change to help in the long run. Mission of Hope allowed me to serve with the volunteers and workers while gaining insight. Amid speaking with clients and hearing their voices, I have learned how to be ethical, nonjudgmental, and supportive. I was able to work outside of my comfort zone by learning how to appropriately receive sensitive information from the clients. Over time, I became a familiar face, which added to my credibility and aided in clients sharing personal and difficult experiences with me. I have heard many stories and tribulations from clients; however, only those who were aware my project was taking place and that they were participating in it were included in my results. Balancing casual participation, while being ethical, and gaining consent for the Institutional Review Board was an important lesson in this research. Empowering these clients to share their stories enables them to improve their own lives. By sharing their trials with me, I've gained a firsthand observation and knowledge of the Cedar Rapids homeless community. Surprisingly, yet appreciatively, while getting immersed in helping others, I found it actually grounded me and brought purpose and perspective to things in my own life. These changes in the clients and myself are more than can be measured in a survey or tested through calculations.

My efforts were more than just academic. I have continued visiting Mission of Hope to volunteer in its clothes closet and food pantry. Each day that I entered Mission of Hope inspired me to further work within the community. I am grateful this project gave me a better understanding of the Cedar Rapids homeless community. As action research and community-based research aim to give voice, I believe I have done that and intend to further share in the successes of this organization and its clients. Presenting my process and findings at our annual research symposium allowed me to spread and hopefully instill the challenges and successes I have found in this project in others. One of the directors at Mission of Hope has even helped me to network with a foreign exchange student from China, who is currently attending a university across the state and is interested in philanthropy and psychology. The impact of this community research continues to expand and amaze me.

I am grateful for the directors of Mission of Hope, Martin Dwyer and Pat Ralston, who steadfastly encouraged and applauded me. Their selfless dedication has clearly made the difference at Mission of Hope and in the lives of many. With their goals and passion, I was able to create and execute a research project with my community that will support the work of Mission of Hope and improve the lives of many.

~

I would like to thank Dr. Roger Johanson for leading our action research course at Coe College. I would also like to thank Kayla Lyftogt for her expertise in the field and persistent encouragement with this endeavor. I would like to thank those associated with the Undergraduate Journal of Service Learning and Community-Based Research for this opportunity to share this work and further give voice to the clients of Mission of Hope. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their endless support in all of my pursuits.