

Knowledge Building With Communities

Outreach Scholarship and the Community

To have effective outreach scholarship, high quality faculty must be involved in outreach programs, and these endeavors must be collaborative efforts with the communities they serve. Richard M. Lerner, director, Institute for Children, Youth, and Families (ICYF) at Michigan State University, believes that faculty will involve themselves if the outreach appeals to their heads as well as their hearts, and if they are convinced that outreach scholarship is something they can do to be at the leading-edge of scholarship. Lerner observes that “We know how to build effective programs. What we don’t know how to do is sustain programs in the community.” Typically, outreach is researcher-centered. The researcher comes into a community, creates and conducts a program, evaluates it, and writes it up. Eventually, the grant runs out, the researcher leaves, and the program dies. “We need to find a way to build the program into the values of the community.”

Human Ecology: A Multidisciplinary, Community Collaborative Process

The Institute for Children, Youth, and Families falls within the discipline of human ecology. Research scholarship in home economics has become a multidisciplinary, community collaborative process, offering a model for engaging the best minds. Scholars in the field now view human development as the result of a set of complex, dynamic relationships in a social network, all of which change over time. Human development happens in relation to this context. We cannot understand how human development occurs without focusing on the community in which people live. Therefore, the scholar has to study and work in the community.

Science involves description and explanation, according to Lerner. Science requires researchers to control certain variables in order to assess the effect of other variables on outcomes. In communities, the variables that scholars can manipulate are policies and programs. You change policies and programs or devise new policies and programs to try to change the trajectory of people’s lives, to revise the people-context relationship. Work like contextual research thus blurs the line between basic and applied research.

To be effective both as a scholar and as an agent for change in the community, the researcher must become a co-learner in the community, no longer a temporary observer or agent. The researcher learns about the nature of the community from the community, learns its values, learns what community members think will help bring about positive change. In a collaborative effort, the community learns knowledge and gains expertise to sustain effective programs. Program planning, development, and evaluation are done jointly, building capacity in the community to improve the life opportunities of its children.

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Development-In-Context Evaluation (DICE) Model

The Institute for Children, Youth, and Families uses a Development-In-Context Evaluation (DICE) model for outreach program development. Through this model, researchers learn from the community what the problems and issues are, and engage the community in the preliminary work and the program planning, including determining desired outcomes and collecting preliminary data. To be effective, the outreach scholar needs to think holistically and include as many voices from the community as possible. The aim is to cause social change, so this is activist scholarship. Evaluation should be focused on forming effective programs that catalyze social change in the community, and so evaluation should be part of day-to-day program activities. Effective outreach programs build from the strengths of the community to increase community capacity and promote empowerment of community members.

With the DICE approach, programs are based on the norms and values of the community. Young people are more likely to be involved. Because the community is an active participant and because evaluation is participatory, the ability of the community to attain its goals is enhanced.

The DICE Model in Action: ICYF and the Black Child and Family Institute

Natreece Hill described the collaboration between ICYF and the Black Child and Family Institute (BCFI) in Lansing. The BCFI was created to deal with issues that disproportionately affect black children and families in Lansing. Its mission is to mobilize resources to improve the quality of life of black children and families. ICYF is using the DICE model to involve staff members, program participants, and community members in the evaluation of staff and programming at the BCFI.

Evaluation focused on what is unique to the BCFI that makes it difficult for it to reach its goals, according to Urminda Firlan. Staff identified issues that they were empowered to change and brainstormed to develop creative, realistic solutions that did not require significant funding. They relayed findings to board members, who will devise a plan for implementation.

As a result of using the DICE model in the BCFI, learning and insights have been gained through the development of collaborative relationships. Outreach scholars and graduate assistants alike have learned the importance of establishing strong relationships that can lead to fuller insights. Since this is a new model of outreach scholarship, members of the community sometimes have difficulty understanding the collaborative process and have expectations of a more dependent relationship. Researchers need to explain the process thoroughly to collaborators and encourage their full participation.

Researchers used to obtain efficiency of outreach scholarship by coming in and taking control of the program. However, to be effective over time, outreach scholars need to balance this efficiency with collaboration. Scholars need the input of community members, while collaborators themselves are unsure about their responsibility to provide input and the appropriate ways to do so.

Certain complications are inherent in any team approach: scheduling, time management, and the potential for conflict are examples. One effective method for teamwork is to use focus group procedures during meetings. Limit the size of the group; use a moderator for meeting leadership; record the meeting and take notes; establish procedures for reaching resolution; and circulate an agenda to all participants before the meeting. The focus group model ensures the involvement of all collaborators in the direction of the effort.

Results and Conclusions

The ICYF has spent a great deal of time building the collaboration with the BCFI before dealing with the issue at hand – neighborhood violence and gangs. The partners are not yet able to deal with the issue because they are still dealing with staff organization, morale, and organizing volunteers. Outreach researchers in the effort have learned a lot about dealing with the community. Lerner and others are convinced that this model of community collaboration will not only provide valuable information and basic knowledge. In addition, it will enable the delivery of information that will substantially affect the community's ability to improve the quality of life of its children.