



## The Challenges and Rewards of Community-Based Research and Scholarly Engagement

Kimberly Lancaster, Coastal Carolina Community College, U.S., [lancasterk@coastalcarolina.edu](mailto:lancasterk@coastalcarolina.edu)  
Leslie Hossfeld, University of North Carolina Wilmington, U.S.  
Erin O'Donnell, University of North Carolina Wilmington, U.S.  
Hillary Geen, University of North Carolina Wilmington, U.S.

Universities reach out to neighboring communities in many different ways. Community-based research and service-learning projects are often good mechanisms to improve relationships between the campus and the community by making a meaningful difference in the areas surrounding college campuses (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). There are many challenges in doing this type of research. This paper examines some of these challenges and the many rewards of scholarly engagement through a discussion of the experiences of undergraduate, graduate and faculty participation in a unique community-university partnership and ongoing community-based research.

### The Importance of Community-Based Learning Experiences

Community-based service-learning is a popular form of student engagement. First, there is a strong pedagogical tradition in service-learning as it allows for student scholarship through research, practice, and teaching (Boyer, 1990). But also, in a highly competitive workforce, university students feel an increased need for hands-on work experience. Community-based service-learning experiences provide an opportunity for students to use critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as conflict resolution skills, in real-life situations (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). The experience that students

gain can help prepare them for their careers, give them a better awareness of social problems within their community, and provide a realistic experience of connecting theory to practice (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000).

A thorough, comprehensive, community-based service-learning experience can provide reciprocal rewards to both the university and the community. It fulfills the civic mission of institutions of higher education by providing needed resources to the community. Service-learning is a mechanism to formalize student involvement which, in turn, encourages students to become a part of their surrounding community (Strand et al., 2003; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Community-based service-learning and research is an effective way to collaborate with the community, helping universities and communities become more productive, providing long-term impact for all parties (Boyer, 1990; Marullo, Moayed, & Cooke, 2009; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). The pedagogy of community-based research is one of the most important forms of service learning because it allows for direct engagement with the community and provides a powerful learning experience. Through their participation, students are better able to understand how social concerns are directly connected to individual problems (Marullo et al., 2009; Stoecker, 2005; Strand et al.,

2003). Community-based service-learning and research can lead to advocacy, which in turn may lead to empowerment of the community and potentially to building community capacity (Mooney & Edwards, 2001).

Community-based, scholarly service-learning projects can be appealing to many academic disciplines; however, social scientists find it particularly beneficial. When professors teach students in real-world settings, they are able to connect the abstractness of theories and concepts to real-life issues, which in turn helps students to better understand how these concepts and theories apply to social problems. Service-learning and community-based projects promote the development of active involvement and integrate real-life experiences into academia. Service-learning experiences that are incorporated into sociological courses allow students to use their critical thinking skills and enable better understanding of the structural causes for many social problems, giving them the opportunity to “do” sociology, not just study it (Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Marullo et al., 2009).

### **The WHA-UNCW Community Campus in Wilmington, North Carolina**


As discussed above, one of the best ways to connect the classroom to the community is to physically *take* the classroom to the community. This has been accomplished at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) through the creation of a community campus based at a public housing neighborhood.

In 2005, the director of the UNCW Public Sociology Program sought to create community-based, *hands-on* experiences for public sociology undergraduate and graduate students and began looking for opportunities to conduct research *in* and *with* the community. The idea of a community campus where community, students, and faculty could

work together addressing critical issues facing resource-poor neighborhoods began to take shape. It took almost three years of meetings to lay the foundation to create the campus. There was strong support from top administration at UNCW to see the partnership come to fruition. A series of meetings, bringing together representatives from the non-profit sector, public housing authority administration and residents, faculty from across the university, health and human service practitioners, community college administrators, grant writers, law enforcement representatives, graduate and undergraduate students, university information technology administrators, and community organizers took place to lay the foundation for comprehensive community-based scholarship opportunities.

Some early concerns stemmed from public housing residents who were tired of being “researched.” Over the years the university had conducted its fair share of surveys “on” residents, only to disappear once the data had been collected. Residents were particularly irritated by the lack of communication and collaboration with researchers; they were tired of being “subjects” of research. Having everyone at the table during these many months of planning helped shape the focus of the partnership and build the much-needed trust that had been lacking for many years. The physical presence of the university at a public housing community helped residents see that a sustainable, long-term partnership was possible.

With special assistance from the vice chancellor for public service at UNCW and key partners at Wilmington Housing Authority (WHA), the WHA-UNCW Community Campus opened its doors at the Hillcrest Public Housing Community in May 2008. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the UNCW chancellor and the executive director of WHA. While the Community Campus is based at one public housing



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community in Wilmington, it provides outreach and service to all seven public housing neighborhoods in Wilmington as well as all low-income residents in the area.

The structure of the WHA-UNCW Community Campus is still taking shape after three-and-a-half years of operation. With the state budget crisis affecting both the university and public housing, funding is a constant struggle. An immediate concern was to secure funding to hire a Community Campus coordinator. In the first year, WHA had a small amount of money to hire a part-time coordinator. Since then, the UNCW Public Sociology Master of Arts Program has committed a graduate assistantship position to serve as campus coordinator. The person in this position manages over 18 programs at the Community Campus, writes grants, oversees Public Sociology interns, coordinates research projects at the center, and develops new partnerships in the community. An advisory board was created consisting of the WHA director, WHA residents, WHA staff, members of the WHA board of directors, the UNCW Public Sociology director, UNCW vice chancellor of Public Service, UNCW student, and Community Campus coordinator. This group meets monthly to address funding needs, operational concerns, and programming.

Substantial *in-kind* start-up funding has been provided from both the university and housing authority. UNCW Information and Technology Services Department (ITSD) installed 14 computers and printers at the Community Campus; the housing authority provides funding for wireless access. WHA maintains the Community Campus building and covers operational expenses. IBM donated three KidSmart computers and \$14,000 for technology needs at the Community Campus. The partnership has secured close to \$100,000 in small-grant funding, and both UNCW and WHA are actively pursuing grants, including a federal Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant.

Numerous university departments offer programs at the Community Campus, including music, art, gerontology, social work,

education, and information technology. Almost all of the programs that are offered to residents have research agendas attached to them. In addition, the WHA-UNCW Community Campus partners with community agencies to offer programming to residents. These include General Education Development (GED) classes and Career Pathways courses taught by the local community college faculty; DREAMS, a non-profit arts program for children offering dance, pottery, and art classes; a college counseling program; and a nutrition and community garden program provided by the Southeastern North Carolina Food Systems Program, a local non-profit economic development project. The entire UNCW Public Sociology Program is based on-site at the Community Campus. Students have offices, and classes are held at the community campus throughout the academic year.

This rest of this essay examines a long-term, community-based research project of the UNCW Public Sociology Program. The section that follows describes the on-going research and the theoretical underpinnings that guide this research. This is followed by reflection from four key university researchers involved in the project and includes a discussion of the challenges and rewards of participating in community-based service-learning research.

### **UNCW Public Sociology Community-Based Research Project: Building Community Capacity**

Public sociology involves taking the tools of the discipline of sociology beyond the academy and engaging with various publics on critical social issues. The Public Sociology Program at UNCW began in 2005, is one of the few in the nation, and is the first to offer an M.A. in Public Sociology. The program is viewed as a pioneer in engaging publics and has gained a reputation for its innovative approach to broadening the discipline (Anthony, 2008).

One of the key innovations of the program is the research and engagement taking place at the WHA-UNCW Community Campus. The program is designed so that undergraduate students participate in a two-semester

experience that is based at the Community Campus. The fall semester course is devoted to working with residents to identify critical social issues, designing a research protocol, and writing a literature review. The spring semester course is a six-hour internship course in which students carry out the proposed research. Students work directly with residents to frame the research agendas and program development. At the end of the two-semester course, students disseminate their findings through presentations to the Wilmington City Council, WHA Board of Directors, other community stakeholders, and academic conferences. (The last cohort of Public Sociology undergraduate students had its final research paper accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. See Lancaster et al., 2010.)

All of the research projects that develop are framed under a larger, on-going research project titled *Building Community Capacity at Hillcrest*. By making efforts to improve social issues confronting low-income residents, the Public Sociology students at the Community Campus use Chaskin's (2001) model for building community capacity as the overarching goal of all of its programming and research.

### Defining Community Capacity

Chaskin (2001) defines community capacity as "the interaction of human capital, organization resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community ... it may operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort" (p. 295). The skills and knowledge that a person has provide the base for individual human capital. Social capital assists with the growth of human capital and comes in the form of relationships between people. As community members build relationships, they build social capital; people with strong relationships and strong networks have more opportunity to gain human capital (Coleman, 1988). Community-based service-learning and research can lead to advocacy, which in turn will empower the community; the community members therein

and thus build community capacity (Mooney & Edwards, 2001).

In a general sense, community capacity is what makes a community function well. Notwithstanding the social problems a community may have, every community has identifiable assets. Community capacity-building efforts should focus on those assets and build upon them. However, for many poor neighborhoods, an external capacity-building source might be needed for the capacity-building initiative to be successful (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001).

Community capacity comprises six dimensions: 1) fundamental characteristics of the community, 2) levels of social agency, 3) functions in the community, 4) strategies, 5) conditioning influences, and 6) other community-level outcomes (Chaskin, 2001; Chaskin et al., 2001). All of the dimensions are inter-related and have potential effects on one another. For communities that work well together, community capacity is continually reinforced through the first three fundamental dimensions (community member knowledge, community member networks, and community engagement). However, the additional dimensions (community and leadership development training sessions) are needed to improve and/or enhance the growth of community capacity within communities that face barriers.

### WHA-UNCW Public Sociology Research Model

All of the Public Sociology Program research projects that have developed over the past three years are framed by the theoretical underpinnings of Chaskin's model of building community capacity described above. The goal of the long-term Public Sociology work at the Community Campus is to build community capacity by developing residents' human and social capital through empowerment, leadership, and asset development. Some of the individual research projects that have grown from this theoretical model have focused on examining food security needs for low-income residents, Electronic Banking Transfer (EBT) food stamps card use at the local farmers' markets, and identifying public transportation bus routes

that meet low-income users' daily needs. In 2010, the Wilmington City Council voted to take action on research findings from the students' research, in particular revamping public transportation bus routes in the city. Another project involved a needs-assessment of low-income residents in a high-crime area of Wilmington. A team of graduate students, faculty, and public housing residents carried out the research, interviewing residents and service providers. The findings were disseminated to a newly formed New Hanover County Blue Ribbon Commission Taskforce on Youth Violence. Recommendations from the report were instrumental in creating the Youth Enrichment Zone, a new program modeled on the successful Harlem Children's Zone.

One of the outcomes of this unique model has been the creation of a sequence of students who have stayed with the Public Sociology Program from undergraduate to graduate level and have gained important vantage points as researchers and participants in the community-based research process. Three of the authors of this paper have been undergraduate student interns based at the WHA-UNCW Community Campus. All three students have moved on to the graduate program, at the time of writing one as a first-year M.A. student (O'Donnell), and the second is completing the M.A. Program in Public Sociology at UNCW (Lancaster); Geen has just received her Bachelor of Arts in Public Sociology and will be joining the graduate program in fall 2011. Both O'Donnell and Lancaster have served as coordinators for the WHA-UNCW Community Campus, and Lancaster has since received a position as WHA-UNCW community liaison, working in the division of UNCW Public Service. Hossfeld is a faculty member at UNCW, co-founder of the WHA-UNCW Community Campus, and director of the UNCW Public Sociology Program; she serves as faculty liaison between the university and community partners.

We believe these unique vantage points from various levels within the community-university partnership provide distinctive insight into the challenges and rewards of community-based research. A mentoring component has also developed among

undergraduate, graduate, and faculty participants in the project. What follows is a dialogue from the perspective of four university participants: undergraduate student, graduate student, project coordinator, and faculty member. Each examine the difficulties, barriers, rewards, and success of creating quality undergraduate and graduate community-based research experiences and reflect upon the implicit mentoring process that has developed within the UNCW Public Sociology model.

### **Dialogue on the Challenges and Rewards of Community-Based Research and Scholarly Engagement**

#### **The Undergraduate Perspective – Hillary Geen**

As an undergraduate student, I conducted research exploring barriers faced by residents in resource-poor neighborhoods in the areas of childcare, employment, higher education, and after-school programs. My class had 13 students, and we divided into groups of three or four students each, each group covering one area of research. Each research project was conducted with the same theoretical foundation, bringing them together under the over-arching model of building community capacity. My group conducted exploratory research on possible barriers to participation in after-school programs for middle school-aged youth (ages 11-13). After acquiring written consent from parents and their children, we conducted scripted interviews with open-ended questions that were designed to explore what may prevent or encourage participation in after-school programs. Each student received Institutional Review Board certification at the beginning of the semester.

Conducting research in the community has been challenging as well as extremely rewarding. Every student faces the challenge of making the grade for a particular class. Functioning in a "learn-as-you-go" environment instead of reading about research in the classroom can sometimes make me feel off-task or distracted, yet it provides great insight and rewarding experiences.

The challenging side of community-based research is working with the rhythms of everyday life in a community. The nature of our surroundings can creep into the structured class setting and make it feel disorganized and haphazard. The Community Campus can be a bit chaotic at times, overrun with children or quiet and empty on days when participation is low. The day-to-day details that keep the campus functioning are carried out by the campus coordinator as well as undergraduate interns.

My cohort is larger than those in the program's past, and there are advantages and disadvantages to having such a large cohort in a community-based research project. There can be a tendency to become narrowly focused on one's facet of the research, which can lead to a fracturing in the class and misunderstandings. On the other hand, what may feel like a lack of organization and concerted effort forces one to dig deep for ideas and increases our agency as students. We can also use the successes and failures of each group's research process to inform our own research. I am actively learning how to work in a group setting with varying personalities and goals and feel that my experience will greatly aid me in the future.

Recruiting participants was the most difficult aspect of the research process for my group and other groups. Spending two semesters in the community working with the residents has facilitated developing relationships with residents who visit the Community Campus for various programs. The most rewarding and challenging aspects of my undergraduate research experience have involved working with residents in the communities we partner with and my peers in the practicum. I have established relationships with many of the residents who participate in the various programs offered at the Community Campus. This has created a new social network full of richness and diversity, which is very rewarding. I feel more connected to my community as I have been able to cross social boundaries through research and participation.

It is also personally challenging to observe that only a portion of the residents are able to

participate in the various programs at the campus. When I am canvassing or playing with the children, I notice many residents who don't come to the campus for any of the resources. The Community Campus is a conduit for resources to help empower the community and build a sense of community, so it is disheartening to realize that the Community Campus is not addressing the needs of certain segments of the population. I think the size of the campus is a definite issue: it is small and can only administer programs within this scope. Intuitively, I suspect that missing segments of the population may act as a mitigating factor in the construction of a real sense of community. However, I look forward to watching the progress of the community with every passing semester. I have no doubt that as all of the kinks are worked out of the system and as funding increases, community capacity will increase, flourish, and expand. The Public Sociology seminar and practicum have provided me with an opportunity to utilize sociological theories in actual practice. Developing a theoretical foundation for a proposed avenue of research and having the opportunity to follow through on the research is an invaluable experience. All of the glitches and challenges in the research exposed me to social realities I may have otherwise overlooked in the usual classroom setting and how the research process is not always cut and dry.

We are learning how to navigate the many channels of the university bureaucracy and are making headway. This semester we have the advantage of a liaison who has participated in the program as an undergraduate student and as the campus coordinator. Having this continuity helps guide our work.

### The Graduate Student Perspective – Erin O'Donnell

When students engage in community-based research, the commonplace routine of the traditional classroom setting no longer applies. Leaving the comfort of the classroom can be murky terrain, but it allows students to

experience what *doing* sociology is actually like.

Through the WHA-UNCW partnership, I was able to apply concepts and social theories to a real-life setting. To ensure quality undergraduate work, students' research experiences at the Community Campus have multiple players involved to mentor the process. Guidance is received from fellow undergraduate students, the graduate intern coordinator, faculty, and community members to assist in navigating community-based research.

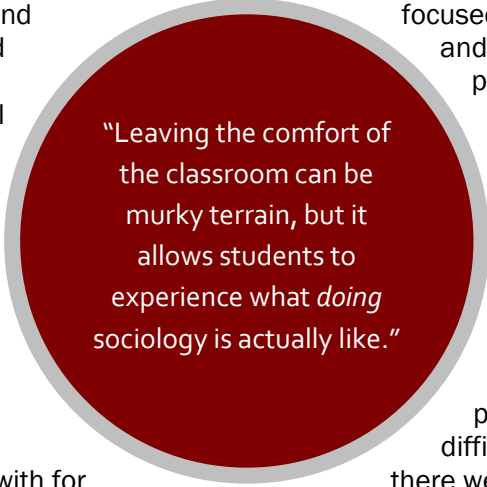
I have had the opportunity to occupy two positions and vantage points in my work at the Community Campus: one as an undergraduate intern and the other as graduate community coordinator. The experience of mentoring community-based research and conducting community-based research possesses both rewards and challenges. I will begin with a discussion of the rewards and challenges of conducting community-based research by describing my work as an undergraduate intern. Then I will discuss the rewards and challenges of being a graduate community coordinator.

The population I worked with for my undergraduate research was parents, particularly mothers. Through collaboration with the School of Education, a program called "A Step Ahead" was created to provide free informational sessions to describe various techniques for developing children's cognitive abilities. This program was based on prior research that suggests early childhood intervention programs help bridge the gap between low- and middle-income students' academic outcomes (Trotman, 2001; Yan, 1999; Barnett, 1995; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Through program development and implementation and the research conducted on the program, I realized one of the greatest challenges of community-based research is recruiting and retaining participants. Several steps were

taken to ensure the program fit the needs and wants of the residents. A preliminary survey (n=47) was conducted among residents with children ages four and under to gauge interest for the program. Of those residents who were interested, only one out of three actually participated in the program. Through conversation with residents I learned the original time the program was scheduled conflicted with naptime. The professor from the School of Education who was coordinating this program agreed to adjust the time. Once the time was adjusted, participation did not increase, and the original research question had to be revised. Dr. Hossfeld and Kim Lancaster assisted in redirecting my research question. Instead of documenting behavior changes through surveys, the revised question

focused on the barriers of participation and participants' perception of the program. By conducting semi-structured interviews, I found mothers who attended the program considered it beneficial though responsibilities of managing a single-headed household made consistent participation difficult.

Although retaining participants proved to be more difficult than I initially assumed, there were multiple rewards. Through my experiences at the Community Campus, I gained a thorough understanding of how complicated conducting research with people can be. Community-based research allowed me to develop my social and professional skills and enhanced my ability to balance and navigate academic and community cultures. Developing these skills was a personal reward of community-based research, and these rewards will be an asset in the professional arena. Moreover, beyond social skills, I was awarded the opportunity to interact and get to know WHA residents. Lastly, I felt I contributed to the capacity of the community and to the greater well-being of Wilmington by assisting in developing, implementing, and researching an early childhood intervention program.



I have since moved to the coordinator position at WHA-UNCW Community Campus through my graduate assistantship with the Public Sociology Masters Program. In this capacity, I provide guidance and mentoring to undergraduate Public Sociology students. Although challenges can arise from community-based research, undergraduate students can rely on the faculty advisor and the research intern coordinator for guidance. “Guidance” is the key word, though. Each intern works 12 hours a week at the Community Campus, and as I become more accustomed to the intern coordinator position, each day brings new insights. The impulse to speak on behalf of the interns is a challenge. For example, when communicating with the residents to recruit research participants, I give the interns tips as to how to verbally frame their work, instead of actively recruiting resident participants on their behalf. I offer guidance on how to avoid academic speak and warn interns against making any assumptions about the community. For example, I provide additional guidance and mentoring on the role of research, particularly when I observed interns’ overzealous attempts to do something *for* the community rather than *with* the community. I have found that undergraduate interns tend to need redirection back to the research process as the need for an immediate result can cause interns to lose sight of the learning process and exchange of types of knowledge for both university and community in working together.

Although guidance can be a challenge at times, the true reward arises from the creation of a bridge between community and academia, in which research is deepened and strengthened by confluence of community and academic knowledge that informs community-based research (Nyden, Hossfeld, & Nyden, 2011).

### The Second-Year Graduate Student Perspective – Kimberly Lancaster

I have been involved with the Community Campus in one way or another for the past three years, from undergraduate researcher and intern, to graduate student and campus coordinator, to my current roles (at the time of

writing) as a UNCW employee in Public Service working and the community outreach liaison for the Community Campus. I feel that I have been able to gain a world of knowledge and experience through each of my day-to-day experiences, and my life and educational experience is richer for it.

I began my experience as an undergraduate student in the Public Sociology Program as a member of the first cohort to do its seminar and practicum at the Community Campus. Prior to my experience at the Community Campus, I had always been able to rely on my life experiences to relate my studies to the “real” world. I was and am a non-traditional student, and that has allowed me greater insight; or so I thought. My experiences at the Community Campus opened my eyes to a world I would have never known without this rich and engaging experience.

My cohort was relatively small, and we became very close. Although we were each working on our own research projects, we worked collaboratively to get the best results. We assisted the campus coordinator in program creation and implementation and other daily support of the newly formed Community Campus. Because of the newness of the Community Campus we quickly became the faces of UNCW and began building relationships in order to increase our network within the community. We learned early on that working within the public realm is not very easy and can actually get pretty messy at times, but I realized it was extremely worthwhile and exciting.

During my undergraduate public sociology seminar and practicum, I completed research on low-income parents’ and guardians’ views on parental involvement in their children’s schools. Though I had taken a sociology methods class, I had no actual research experience. During the fall semester, I completed a literature review, determined my research methods, and prepared to dive right in when I returned from Christmas break. Although I had a plan, I quickly learned that my professor was correct in telling us that working in and with the public can be very messy. My original methodology was focus

groups, but when I was unable to secure participants, I decided to switch to semi-structured interviews with parents or guardians and was only able to get three parents to commit to interviews. I once again changed my method approach to surveys and got a good response. As time went by and I was having difficulty, my fellow students, the campus coordinator, and my professor encouraged me and gave advice and suggestions on ways to gain participants and gather data. Although the data collection process was challenging, it was a beneficial experience.

Looking back at my undergraduate experience, I actually consider my inexperience as being both a challenge and a benefit. Due to my worthwhile undergraduate experience, I decided to continue my public sociology experience by enrolling in the Criminology and Public Sociology Master's Program at UNCW. This not only gave me the opportunity to continue my education and experience at the Community Campus but also gave me the opportunity to continue working with Dr. Hossfeld. Through my graduate program, I was able to become her graduate assistant, which gave me the opportunity to assist with the undergraduate public sociology class as a teaching assistant. I also worked as the campus coordinator at the Community Campus and worked with the new cohort as its internship supervisor. I coordinated all programs and activities that took place at the Community Campus and served as a guide or mentor for student research. I was able to use my previous year's experience to give guidance when needed and/or requested to each of the interns. It quickly became apparent that the structure of our program and the Community Campus was inadvertently creating a reciprocal mentoring experience that was unintended but extremely beneficial for all involved.

I not only built a relationship with the student interns, my professor, and employees of the WHA but also worked very closely with many of the residents of the community. As my social network within the community grew, I became an unofficial member of the community, a source of information and

advice for many, and a good friend for a few. By building relationships, I was able to connect with the community and glean information that I might never have been able to gather otherwise. I became much more in tune with the community members and was better able to assist them with their questions and concerns. The longer I have been involved, the more I have seen community members grow into community leaders, and the community is becoming more unified. Using my community connections, I have been able to assist students in their research by helping them make connections and create their own relationships. I have seen a lot of growth in social capital between community members and UNCW representatives, which is a step in the direction of increasing community capacity.

While acting as the campus coordinator, I was able to complete my graduate thesis/internship research in the community. I explored the organizational structure and relationships that take place in community university partnership, more specifically the Community Campus. Through a case study methodology, I was able to examine the relationships that take place between the community and university partners. I completed semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from WHA and UNCW and used participant observation to record day-to-day activities and interactions that took place at the Community Campus and/or through the partnership. By looking at the history behind and creation of the Community Campus as well as the day-to-day happenings, I was able to see the benefits and challenges that take place when communities and universities work together collaboratively on community-based research. Through my research, I have gained a greater relationship with my mentor and more skills to become a stronger example and mentor for future students.

I have recently been able to move into a new position, community outreach liaison, in the Division for Public Service and Continuing Studies. My new position allows me the opportunity to reach out to additional university staff and faculty to expand and increase involvement from the university at

the Community Campus. The Community Campus is still relatively new, and we seek to improve the partnership by bringing more opportunities for student service-learning and community-based research, which will also increase available programming and activities for residents. Through my new position, I am able to continue a relationship with the community while creating more relationships within the university. I also work directly with the new campus coordinator, one of my former interns, providing guidance in program coordination and assisting with intern mentoring. As the community outreach liaison, I am able to provide information and guidance to a much larger group of people with the hope of continuing and expanding the strengths and capacity of the Community Campus. The Community Campus is a beneficial and unique experience for all involved.

#### The Faculty Perspective – Leslie Hossfeld

The traditional university structure makes it really difficult to do meaningful community-based research. Over the years I have struggled to find and create modules that I could implement in a one-semester course that provides community-based research experiences that a) could be accomplished in one semester and b) had meaning and relevance to lived experiences without being overwhelmingly artificial. In the social sciences, we teach students methods, theory, and data collection and analysis, but never really provide true research experience in the undergraduate curriculum in which students work through and experience every step of the research process. The two-semester model we created at UNCW provides this long-term opportunity to examine prior literature, fine-tune a research question, identify data collection, collect and analyze data, and disseminate findings. The icing on the cake is the ability to carry out this research in a community setting — on the ground, in the trenches, informed by people whose life experiences enrich the research process. The community campus described in this essay provides this richness of setting to conduct meaningful social research while providing

scholarly community engagement opportunities.

Developing an infrastructure to address the limitations of the academic semester system has helped streamline our community-based research and scholarly engagement logistics for our program, helping moderate some of the difficulties in gaining access to communities to do scholarly engagement. Our current focus is on developing a more structured collaborative research team approach that effectively integrates community knowledge and university knowledge, though we are far from this ideal. While we have begun integrating community/resident knowledge perspectives in informing all stages of the research and programming, along with the more traditional academic input, our efforts would be considered in the novice stage and not yet fully realized. One of our current challenges is to fully develop this practice as we move ahead in our work with public housing. We recognize that it is critical that public sociologists and students of public sociology get outside of their day-to-day environment and comfort zone, and the infrastructure of the Community Campus has provided that mechanism. We believe that discovery and innovation develop when we are confronted with new ideas, different ways of doing things, and different ways of looking at a problem. Yet in doing this and in working with our partners, we have had to negotiate complex organizational bureaucracies, navigate constituent priorities, and navigate the vastly different cultures of community and university. This is an on-going challenge to ensuring the long-term success of this project. It contributes to the messiness of community-based research and engagement, yet it probably provides one of the richest learning experiences for all involved.

It could be argued that the rewards of this type of research and engagement far outweigh the difficulties. There are two compelling results that emerged from this type of community-based research. First, working in the community directly with community partners creates a rich exchange of learning experiences for students, faculty, and

community members. Second, this type of community engagement helps students see the intricacies of research, the lived experiences of communities they often would not have personal access to, and helps them grow as stewards of their own communities. The tacit mentoring process that organically developed through this type of model helped mitigate the obvious tensions that arise when two cultures (academic and community) bump against each other as they navigate their respective environments. Undergraduate students who are trying to figure out the research process in action are able to turn to experienced mentors at the graduate level, who in turn are able to rely on faculty guidance as they navigate these challenges. The richness of this process and its impact on those involved is difficult to measure, yet the dialogue offered in this paper describes qualitatively the positive impact this type of work has on students. As a faculty member, it is extremely rewarding to see students grow as scholars and advance in their careers being able to use the tools of their discipline to make substantive change in their communities.

The model for research at the WHA-UNCW Community Campus is still taking shape. The university has recognized the value in providing students with opportunities to participate in scholarly engagement. Public housing residents and UNCW administration have recognized the value in partnering with the resource-rich university in addressing the vital needs of residents. Both have adopted an approach that recognizes and values the knowledge that each bring to the table. Taking a cue from the early formative meetings, all partners are keenly aware of the problems that arise when people feel they are being

researched *on* instead of working *with* researchers. The work at the Community Campus has kept this concern at the forefront of all its planning, ensuring that residents are part of every step along the way. Residents agreed that this framework best fits the spirit of the collaborative partnership that is growing at the Community Campus, and in many ways, this is the underlying model that shapes and informs the work of the WHA-UNCW community partnership. Results from a recent evaluation of the community campus programming suggest that the partnership is moving in that direction (Lancaster et al., 2010).

### Final Thoughts

Community-based research is difficult, time consuming, and complex. Working alongside someone with prior experience who is willing to give you guidance is more than just helpful; it can be life changing. University students who participate in service-learning experiences, more specifically community-based research, gain real-world experiences that allow them to gain a unique perspective on social issues and concerns. Students should be given the opportunity to learn in the real-world settings and connect their classwork and lessons accordingly.

In 2010, the WHA-UNCW Community Campus received the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officers (NAHRO) Award of Merit in Housing and Community Development. While the honor of receiving national recognition is rewarding, the partners stay grounded in the reality that the road ahead is a long one and that a lot of work still needs to be done.

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