

## **Collaborative University-Community Research Teams**

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Since its creation in 1996, Loyola University's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) has used collaborative university-community research teams to complete more than 150 research projects. Projects have ranged from how to sustain stable diverse neighborhoods to developing culturally sensitive approaches to domestic violence prevention in the South Asian community.<sup>1</sup> CURL is an innovative, non-traditional research center that only engages in research where community organizations are involved in conceptualization and development of the research projects. In most cases, community partners are also involved at various levels in all phases of the research, including methodology design, data collection, data analysis, report writing, and dissemination of research results. Community partners include informal neighborhood networks, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, non-profit social service providers, citywide or regional advocacy coalitions, and selected local government agencies.

A primary element in CURL's mission is to bring the community's eyes, ears, and voice to the metaphorical or real "research table." In traditional academic research, new ideas develop out of past discipline-based research and are fine tuned through informal and formal interactions among university-based researchers. Informal discussions--from conversations with colleagues in the hallway to departmental brown bag lunches to discuss developing research ideas--are common venues where new research ideas get vetted among university faculty. In such conversations, suggestions may be made

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of CURL projects is available at [www.luc.edu/curl](http://www.luc.edu/curl).

pointing to additional existing research or theoretical perspectives that might help guide the emerging research project. Ideas for fine-tuning a survey research instrument or other methodological approaches to maximize participation may come up at such times. Academic conferences are occasions where research results are presented and critiqued by colleagues at regional, national, or even international levels. All of these interactions with researcher colleagues – typically within the boundaries of one’s discipline – constitute a metaphorical or literal research table. This process of guidance by colleagues in developing research has been used effectively for many decades within the academy.

Through its collaborative research teams, CURL has effectively *added chairs* at this research table through the center’s overall mission and, more specifically, through its collaborative research teams. These teams include community members, faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and center staff members. Unlike some engaged research where ideas are hatched in the university and then brought to the community, CURL works to involve community members at the conceptualization stage of the research. The venues for conceptualization vary. They have been breakfasts with community leaders where emerging community needs are discussed. They have been meetings with executive directors and/or staff of social service agencies related to pressing internal evaluation needs. In other instances, collaborative research projects themselves have generated new research ideas. When new issues emerge out of ongoing research, CURL often convenes “think tank” meetings of potentially interested faculty, community leaders, and policy makers to discuss facets of an issue and how additional

information – either existing data or newly collected data – may be useful in addressing that issue.

At the heart of all of CURL’s work are its collaborative research teams. A fully developed team will include: faculty members, graduate research fellows, undergraduate fellows or undergraduates from an Urban Studies Seminar run by CURL; community partners or community fellows; and CURL staff. The research process taps into the perspectives and creativity of *all* participants and provides an effective way of managing community and university resources. Teams are also an effective way of integrating university and community resources—from use of graduate and undergraduate student time to efficiently integrating expertise of faculty and community organization staff.

Although the dominant model of university-based research centers has faculty at the core of the center, true to CURL’s collaborative mission, *both* faculty and community partners help frame the research. They are always “on-call” during the research process. Graduate students are at the core of the teams. They manage day-to-day work; coordinate (and mentor) undergraduate fellows; communicate with faculty and community partners as needed; and work with other CURL full-time staff. Given the costs of buying out portions of faculty members’ salaries and the limited time that faculty and already over-taxed community leaders have, engaging graduate students in coordinating the research process effectively extends the research capacity of faculty and community leaders.

Collaborative research teams also provide unparalleled practical learning environments for students. CURL staff often talk about throwing graduate students into the “deep end” of research as a way of teaching them to “swim.” The availability of 15

or more colleagues at the Center in any given day means that there is lots of guidance and advice always available to provide a helpful hand. Graduate students have thrived in this environment.

Guidance comes in many forms. In addition to consultation with other team members and regular team meetings (typically weekly meetings for active projects), graduate students and other team members work in an environment that encourages an exchange of knowledge and exposure to different perspectives – perspectives that are not always available in traditional academic research settings. During the academic year, CURL schedules regular Friday Morning Seminars where CURL researchers present on their research; faculty outside the center talk about community-related issues; community leaders discuss new programs; leaders of advocacy organizations describe current initiatives; and other collaborative researchers talk about community-based participatory research approaches.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to opportunities for mentoring and idea generation provided at the Friday Morning Seminars, CURL holds monthly graduate-student led meetings on substantive or technical aspects of current research projects. These may include topics like: what constitutes research ethics; how to convince the Institutional Review Board that community input in research design is part of the process; how to integrate existing community organization data into the research model; or how to manage undergraduate team members. CURL also schedules bi-monthly “idea meetings” where staff and students can bring up possible new research ideas emerging out of current research projects, or new ideas that might be suggested by policy or community-based issues with

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<sup>2</sup> The current semester’s seminar list as well as past semester lists are available at: <http://www.luc.edu/curl/seminars.html>.

which CURL is aware by virtue of its regular contact with community groups. The physical space of the center itself is also conducive to interaction among staff, students, and faculty on a daily basis. Occupying one-half of one of the floors of the university's academic buildings CURL's more than 20 offices and workstations—including open-office environment design—provide ample opportunity for the more than 50 staff, students, faculty fellows, and visiting community partners to interact formally and informally.

Although staffing and fellowships fluctuate with the number of research projects, in a typical year, CURL has eight full-time staff members, four faculty fellows, two community fellows, 10-12 funded graduate students, 25 paid undergraduate fellows, and another 35 undergraduate students working one-day a week in conjunction with the Urban Studies Seminar. Funding comes either from CURL's endowment or from stipends or salary built into various research grants.<sup>3</sup>

Graduate research fellowships are either combined stipend and tuition scholarship fellowships or hourly-paid fellowships. These fellows typically work 20 hours per week during the semester and full-time in the summer. CURL has an ongoing pool of internal university applicants from which to select new candidates. Graduate fellows are recruited from all departments and schools in the university, but sociology and psychology graduate students have represented about 60 percent of CURL's fellows over the years. CURL offers one-year full-time pre- or post-doctoral fellowships to selected graduate fellows who have worked at the center for one or more years. These have

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<sup>3</sup> CURL has a \$10 million endowment.

proven to be great preparation for graduate students entering either academic or non-academic careers.<sup>4</sup>

Undergraduate fellows are drawn from two sources. Applications for CURL Undergraduate Fellowships are invited from all undergraduate students twice a year. Typically representing 15 or more different majors, undergraduate fellows work ten hours a week on one of CURL's teams.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the paid fellows, another 35 undergraduates enrolled in a six-credit hour Urban Studies Seminar are required to complete ten hours of work per week on a CURL research team.

Faculty involved in research teams sometimes receive fellowships which normally provide course reductions for one or two semesters. In other cases, faculty work with research teams as part of their own ongoing research interests or as a principle investigator on one of CURL's research grants. In some cases, faculty come to CURL with ideas for collaborative university-community research. However, more often than not, CURL approaches faculty about working on potential research projects.

To provide a more level playing field in collaborative research, CURL has always worked to build in compensation for community partners. While this can take the form of paying for community organization office space or other project expenses, it most often means salary support for staff members involved in the research team. CURL offers community fellowships which range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 in a given year. In a few projects CURL has built in full-time "community" positions. In one case, a community organization obtained state funding for an affordable housing research

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<sup>4</sup> Hourly-paid graduate fellows are paid between \$18-20/hour. Pre- or Post-doctoral full-time fellows also receive the same benefits packages as full-time university employees.

<sup>5</sup> Current stipends are approximately \$1,400 per semester or \$9 per hour.

project. With this funding CURL and its community partner hired a full-time researcher who also had community organizing experience in the neighborhoods being studied.

The collaborative research team approach effectively integrates community knowledge and university knowledge. The perspectives of community leaders as well as the knowledge of long-time community residents informs all stages of the research along with the more traditional academic input. These are not perspectives that can easily be understood through surveys and focus groups. They are perspectives that are needed even before effective research approaches can be crafted. Community members *are* at the research table in CURL's research teams.

The teams have also institutionalized community-university knowledge building through an organic process where learning is happening in multiple directions. Faculty learn from community members, community members learn from faculty, and faculty can learn from students. Just as the *outcomes* of collaborative policy research have tied community and university knowledge together in positively affecting the quality of life in local communities, the collaborative team *process* has demonstrated to all involved that everyone has knowledge and that everyone can have a voice.

The collaborative research process is broadening research capacity and involving community members and students, both graduate and undergraduate, who sometimes are marginalized in the traditional discipline-driven research. When CURL was working on a project examining the impact of welfare reform on one of Chicago's economically diverse communities, a college senior who had herself grown up on welfare commented, "This is the first time I've seen a faculty member do research relevant to my community or my family." In the same project, at a dinner with the research team and an advisory

committee of local residents, students were talking about a diversity initiative on campus. One of the community residents responded to the conversation saying, “You are only playing ‘diversity’ on your campus, here in the community we are living diversity.” This led to a conversation that would not have taken place separately in either the university or the community.

The kind of challenges to existing perspectives, to existing assumptions, and to “normal” ways of seeing things that happens at the boundaries between various institutions and social groups in our society represents a valuable and natural way of learning, rethinking one’s perspective, and innovating. Collaborative research serves this function for all involved. It effectively takes teaching “out of the box” of the classroom and makes it a more organic enterprise. It becomes something that more closely resembles the complex environments that students will see in the workplace and in their own communities when they leave college. But it is not merely a teaching opportunity for students. Collaborative research engages all of the participants involved in knowledge production. In an era where we are seeking to strengthen civic engagement at all levels of society, collaborative research represents a new form of “continuing education” for all. It is a dynamic research process with real outcomes and real consequences to the lives of all involved.