

## 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. 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, 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. 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 with community-based organizations

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pointing to additional existing research or theoretical perspectives that might help guide the emerging research project. Ideas for fine

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 consists of 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. Use of graduate and undergraduate student time to efficiently integrate 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 involved during the research process. Graduate students are at the core of the center. They manage day-to-day work; coordinate (and mentor) undergraduate fellows; communicate with faculty and community partners as needed; and work with other CURL fulltime staff. Given the costs of buying out portions of faculty members' salaries and the limited time that faculty and already overtaxed 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 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 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.

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: research ethics; how to convince the Institutional Review Board that community input in resea

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 has more than 20 offices and workstations, including open office environments designed to 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, 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 at the university, but sociology and psychology graduate students have represented about 60 percent of CURL fellows over the years. CURL offers one-year full-time pre or postdoctoral 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 univ



committee of local residents, students were talking about a diversity initiative on campus.

One of the community residents responded to the conversation saying, "You're 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.