

Community-Engaged Research in Teaching Research Methods

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Abstract

This article presents a community-engaged project integrated into a research methods course. The goal of the course was to engage students in research on a transitional housing program for homeless veterans and develop their understanding of veteran homelessness. While students learned the basic concepts, theoretical paradigms, and methods of qualitative research from assigned readings, class lectures, and discussions, they engaged in research activities such as data collection, analysis, and dissemination in real world settings. Toward the end of the semester, the students in the course shared their research findings and recommendations for further improvement with the program stakeholders. The research outcomes were utilized to support the program's development. During the research process, both student researchers and community partners gained benefits by building mutual trust and creating positive relationships. The students who completed the community-engaged project demonstrated greater knowledge of veteran homelessness and suggested ways to help them integrate back into society.

Keywords: research methods course, community engagement, veteran homelessness, program evaluation, clinical sociology

1. Introduction

This article describes a community-engaged project integrated into an undergraduate sociology research methods course. The project was undertaken at a transitional housing program for supporting homeless veterans. By participating in practical and experiential activities, students were expected to learn how social research was

used for solving problems, improving situations, and empowering individuals and groups. While the course aimed to discuss research activities such as data collection, analysis, and dissemination, it also shed light on the discussion of homelessness among veterans, shelter workers who directly work with veterans who were homeless, and the transitional housing program operation. Thus, students were expected to not just apply sociological knowledge and research methods/skills but also recognize the importance of local resources and support services available to individuals in need. Toward the end of the course, the students could see how their research outcomes were utilized to support the program development. The students enrolled in the course reported that they had enjoyed doing research while working with the program director, workers, and residents at the facility. Through their practical research experiences, these students appeared to become more interested in learning research methods and methodologies and gain more confidence with conducting research in real-world settings.

Experiential pedagogies are integrated into our undergraduate sociology curriculum in the form of internship, service learning, and community engagement. I routinely incorporate community-based research into my sociology courses, including research methods. There are positive outcomes of integrating community research into teaching. First, students are more actively engaged when they do hands-on activities, compared to the traditional style with the emphasis on readings and lectures. Through “learning by doing,” students can reinforce their understanding of sociological concepts, perspectives, and methodologies (Raddon et al. 2008, p. 141; Senter 2017, p. 132). Furthermore, the students develop problem-solving skills as well as critical thinking by tackling real-life issues in the community that they are in. Finally, the students who conduct social research are committed to ethical practices. They learn a great deal of professionalism and become well prepared to work in their future occupational fields.

2. Research Setting

*The Housing Support Service for Veterans (HSS)*¹ is a transitional housing program for serving veterans who were formerly homeless. There are 25 beds for veterans, and HHS residents can stay up to six months. The program is usually full, with a waiting list. A total of 15 staff (i.e., nine full-time and six part-time) work at HSS. The program adopts the Housing-First model which aims to provide shelter and support services for homeless veterans and find stable housing for independent living. This model allows residents to stay in the facility without commitment to being substance free or sober, but they are expected to take support services by working with the program staff on the way to securing permanent housing (Kertesz et al. 2017; Montgomery et al. 2013). If veterans have a severe addiction and/or mental illness, the program must connect the veterans with physical and mental health professionals.

Working with veterans experiencing homelessness is not an easy task. According to PEW Research Center (2011), there is a gap of understanding between veterans and civilians. Veterans returning from war often have significant psychological wounds from their combat experiences although they do not necessarily appear to be physically injured. If they lack personal and public support and understanding because of their psychological issues, many of them become homeless. Societal members highly respect veterans because of their service, position, and role. However, once these veterans become homeless, they are negatively perceived and stigmatized in the society for which they have served. Due to the social stigma attached to homelessness and insufficient understanding about war service experiences, homeless veterans often feel excluded and even refused by the society where they live (Applewhite 1997; Blackburn & Owens 2015; Desai et al. 2016). These perceptions may negatively influence their attitudes toward getting social support.

In terms of understanding and addressing the issue of veteran homelessness, the HSS program plays a critical role in the community. The program's mission is "to offer hope, restore dignity, and

1 The institution's name is a pseudonym.

transform lives to help people reach their full potential” (Volunteers of America Ohio & Indiana 2024). Services provided by the Volunteers of America Ohio & Indiana and the Veterans Administration (e.g., case management, substance use and mental health treatment, and referrals for benefits) are available to HSS residents. Thus, HSS staff are expected to effectively work with residents while bridging the relationship between the residents and civilians.

3. Research Approach

I framed this project as an ethnographic case study which aims to explore how norms, values, and behaviors are constructed and shared within a culture-sharing group in a period. While a case study focuses on a particular program, policy, or period, an ethnography investigates the shared and/or learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a group (Creswell 2013). In this study, homeless veterans, staff, and volunteers of HSS are the culture-sharing group. To understand how patterns, meanings, and relationships are shared by the cultural group, participant observation was conducted. Through participant observation, students explored cultural meanings and interactions as viewed from the perspective of people who had experienced particular situations and also examined how their presence possibly influenced what they observed due to their participation (Flick 2014).

Employees’ job satisfaction, performance, and experience associated with their workplace are important factors to determine the success of social service agencies (Kulkarni et al. 2013; Mullen & Leginski 2010; Olivet et al. 2010; Schiff & Lane 2019). By observing attitudes, behaviors, activities, and interactions shared by homeless shelter staff, students were assigned to find how effectively shelter workers complete their duties.

This course was offered in Fall 2017. Prior to the semester, the research protocols were submitted and approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. Sociology students who completed the online research ethics course of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program were invited to register for this course. In total, five students were enrolled in the course.

4. Community Engagement Project for Teaching Research Methods

Higher education in the United States has increasingly stressed gaining practical experience and career-related skills as the critical outcomes of a college degree (Breese 2011; Burawoy 2005; Ciabattari et al, 2018; Donley & Paige 2018; Holtzman & Menning 2015; Senter 2020). Many universities have established opportunities for engaging students in community-based practice and research projects. This growing trend not only shows the relevance of “connecting the classroom with the community and using experiential learning techniques” (Scheel 2002, p.146) but also confirms the importance of sociological perspectives that are established in applied, clinical, and public approaches to the discipline.

There is the consensus that research methods are best taught through hands-on experience and active learning (Blank 2004; Crull & Collins 2004; Raddon et al. 2008; Scheel 2002; Senter 2017). To make sociological research in a realistic way, instructors of research methods often include practical and experiential learning components, such as service learning, action research, and community-based projects, in their courses (Donley & Paige 2018; Greenberg et al. 2020; Holtzman & Menning 2015; Senter 2017; Shostak et al. 2019). Participating in research activities offers students an opportunity where they can practice using sociological knowledge and skills. Through the process, students can see the interconnections between research purposes and real-world conditions and reinforce their knowledge of research methodology (Donley & Paige 2018). Furthermore, when students are committed to research from the beginning to the end, they learn research holistically and recognize “the impact of their efforts on others” (Holtzman & Menning 2015, p. 112). Community-based research for public good aims to improve and benefit society. Completing such research fosters “a sense of accomplishment among students whose efforts are benefiting the community” (Donley & Paige 2018, p. 48). By applying their knowledge, skills, and techniques, students become important resources for community-based organizations (Shostak et al. 2019). Concomitantly, students serve as “knowledge producers” to the community and contribute

to establishing the partnership between university researchers and local organizations (Greenberg et al. 2020, p. 13; Senter 2017).

Both course-based research projects and internships have benefits respectively, but each sets different goals. An internship provides students with work experience by being placed in an organization so that they can receive practical experience and obtain the skills required in a particular occupation (Mobley 2003). A course-based research project offers opportunities where students learn concepts, theories, and methodologies related to course content, where they develop the knowledge and skills that they learn by engaging in research activities, and where they can be part of producing knowledge by doing research (Scheel 2002). The students who participate in course-based research collectively work together toward a shared goal, while internship students independently address the issues that they and their communities face by working at local agencies (Greenberg et al. 2020). When students are expected to work as a team, course-based projects may work well.

Given the benefits from doing social research, I integrated a community-engaged research project into my research methods course employing applied and clinical approaches. This community-engaged project aimed to investigate how effectively the HSS program provided support systems for staff who perform their daily tasks and identify any areas for further improvement of the program. To conduct holistic program evaluation, various aspects of the program need to be examined such as types of service, employees' performance and satisfaction, work environment, staff training and support system, the program client satisfaction, and wider stakeholder perceptions. I designed this project as part of evaluation research in which students get involved in research activities such as data collection, analysis, and dissemination. To deepen an understanding of veteran homelessness, five key concepts were identified: *veterans*, *veteran homelessness*, *workers in homeless shelters*, *transitional housing*, and *Housing-First model*. These keywords were used for writing a literature review. To work with vulnerable and marginalized individuals, having a human-centered view was imperative. In this sense, a clinical sociology approach was relevant

and necessary in this course because it is “a creative, humanistic, rights-based and interdisciplinary specialization that seeks to improve life situations for individuals and groups in a wide variety of settings” (Fritz 2021, p. 4). Through interacting with community partners as well as reading the literature, students were expected to expand their understanding of veterans and further cultivate sensitivity toward those who experienced homelessness.

This research project focused on staff members who worked at HSS because workers’ experience and satisfaction associated with their workplace greatly influence the impact of a program or agency (Kulkarni et al. 2013; Mullen & Leginski 2010; Olivet et al. 2010; Schiff & Lane 2019). By observing HSS staff, the students enrolled in the course were expected to learn how the staff members interacted with each other, how they fulfilled their duties, and how they communicated with residents and helped them transition into permanent housing.

5. Course Outline

The course covered the basics of qualitative research by offering hands-on activities where students would apply theoretical paradigms, methods, and skills. To complete the course, students were expected to accomplish five learning objectives: 1. demonstrate the ability to address social issues by using relevant theoretical paradigms; 2. evaluate research data by applying appropriate scientific criteria; 3. provide critical analysis of published research and develop evidence-based arguments in writing research papers; 4. utilize standards of research ethics and demonstrate professional stances; and 5. professionally make oral research reports. Throughout the semester, students were required to participate in class meetings for lectures and discussions, conduct data collection and analysis, write a report based on their field notes, and present findings to the public.

The course was divided into three phases. During the first four weeks (Weeks 1–4), students prepared for their fieldwork. John W. Cresswell’s book, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, third edition (2013) was chosen as the required textbook for this course. By reading book chapters and completing chapter exercises, the students

learned and reviewed the basic concepts, theoretical paradigms, and methods of qualitative research. In addition to class activities and assignments, the students and I visited the HSS facility and had a meeting with the program director to introduce ourselves. During our visit, the director took us on a facility tour and introduced us to HSS staff.

To understand the characteristics of HSS residents, we were allowed to conduct a secondary analysis of the demographic data collected by the program. The data included both numerical and descriptive data. Through examining the data, the students became familiar with the residents and their situations such as what types of veterans stayed in the program, what caused them to become homeless, and what types of support services they needed for becoming socio-economically independent.

During the second phase (Weeks 5–10), the students started to go to the facility and implemented participant observation. After the staff's work shifts were arranged and confirmed, the students were assigned by the director to staff. In the field, they took field notes per visit and submitted them to the course instructor every week. Meanwhile, the students were tasked to review literature on key terms relevant to this project, which were *veterans*, *veteran homelessness*, *workers in homeless shelters*, *transitional housing*, and the *Housing-First model*.

For the third and final phase (Weeks 11–16), the student team analyzed the qualitative data that they gathered, wrote findings, and compiled a report. As the final product of this course, all the students contributed their writing to the report. The report was structured as follows: Introduction, Literature Review, Description of HSS, Methods, Results, and Discussion. The students were assigned to write each section of the final report. I, as the course instructor, reviewed and edited the final report. At the end of the semester, the students and I were invited to attend the HSS advisory board meeting. The students presented the research report to the director, board members, and staff in both written format and oral presentation.

6. Fieldwork Preparation

The students engaged in field studies by conducting participant observation for approximately 60 hours in total (4 hours per week x 15 days). They were assigned by the program director to one or two staff members and spent at least two hours observing staff. For their fieldwork, the students observed how the program staff prepared and performed their duties in order to learn staff's attitudes, behaviors, activities, and interactions with each other as well as residents. In total, 12 out of 15 staff members agreed to participate in this project. Participant observations were scheduled for two months from the first observation, or for as long as it was mutually comfortable, whichever came first. Students were tasked with following an HSS staff member who consented during the dates that accommodated that staff member's work schedule. Each of the students visited the facility two or three times a week. Each student followed a staff member who consented for 2–4 hours per visit on average. During their fieldwork, the students used the field observation sheet and took notes on physical settings in common areas, staff activities, and interaction patterns among staff.

7. Field Observation

HSS staff performed their duties based on their positions. Security guards were responsible for the overall safety and privacy of the residents. Their daily activities included monitoring the security cameras at the security station in the front lobby, control of the front and rear entrances through electronic locks, and overall supervision of the residents and premises. At the front desk, there was a monitor with a wide array of camera angles to see where people were and what they were doing. The security guards were also responsible for the delegation of sensitive items such as tobacco and provided bus passes to residents, as well as ensuring the safety of other residents by using a metal detector and breathalyzer test for any resident who left the premises.

While the security staff stayed in the security room most of the time, the other staff members often moved around. They were

Resident Monitors (RMs). One of their major responsibilities was to make daily rounds to check on the residents. This was done during each shift, and that information was inputted into a daily log on the computer. One student who particularly focused on RMs reported: "RMs work with veterans on a day-to-day basis and their role at HSS seems to be loosely defined." RMs did various chores such as sweeping, mopping, wiping off various surfaces, doing the dishes after every meal as well as making sure the bathrooms were stocked with paper towels and toilet paper. Besides these tasks, RMs also took on more hands-on responsibilities by working directly with both residents and new intakes. They were involved with a large variety of personal affairs of the residents such as helping veterans receive and organize their mail, set up cell-phone plans, and organize housing options after departure from HSS. They also helped residents with whatever they might need such as helping to prepare paperwork or legal forms and cleaning up a room when someone left the facility. These staff members also made incident reports if they found any illegal contraband such as drugs.

Preparing food and cooking meals for the residents seemed to be critical tasks. After the mealtime was over, staff put the food away, making sure that the appropriate label and expiration date were indicated on the food before putting it away in the refrigerator. During the week, a hot meal was provided by a local hospital. A staff member usually went to the hospital and picked it up for the residents' dinner. The staff used large plastic containers to get the meal and keep it hot until it was served. Before serving, staff checked the temperature of the food and recorded it in a binder. By doing all the tasks, staff were expected to ensure that the food was warm enough for consumption without making anyone sick.

The clinical coordinator was responsible for the overall wellness of the residents in the facility. The daily activities of the clinical coordinator included complying with the Veterans Association of America to ensure the needs of the residents were being met, resident coordination between facilities was appropriate, and crisis/problem intervention was implemented if needed.

Besides HSS staff, volunteers occasionally visited the facility. A student said, “During my field work at HSS, I had interacted with volunteers, and I want to highlight one particular experience.” This student reported that a large group of volunteers (about 20–25 individuals) came to help at HSS. These volunteers worked on many projects during the day, such as landscaping in front of the building and cleaning the bathrooms and kitchen. The main project that the volunteers worked on was to clean out and organize the storage room where extra supplies (e.g., toiletries and clothing) and the clothing of departed residents were stored. The student continued, “Supposedly, this room was nearly dysfunctional prior to the volunteers’ work. The room is now easily accessible.”

Another student who had observed security guards described detailed information about their daily duties. Security staff checked that each resident had signed the daily attendance sheet and updated the board of residents that were either in or out of the building. While monitoring all the people coming in and out, the security guards particularly paid attention to those who came back into the facility after they had left the premises. If the residents came back inebriated or disoriented, they had to stay in the so-called “safe room” in the front lobby until they became sober. Depending on the situation, the security guards needed to perform breathalyzer tests. Before a resident could come in after being gone, security staff would use a metal detector wand to search for any contraband. Most often a resident would hand over any contraband to the security staff before they were let in. If banned items were found, those were taken and kept in the security office where residents were not allowed to enter. The security guards also helped residents by giving them any mail they might have received, laundry detergent, and their tobacco products when they asked.

8. Findings from Observations

Overall, the student research team found that all staff worked well with each other. One student said, “From my observation, it is clear that all staff members work harmoniously and communicate very well to ensure exemplary service to their residents.” Another

student commented on the staff's interactions with residents: "The staff member that I've observed on a regular basis has made deep connections with the residents, engaging them in conversation anytime possible. The residents have become more comfortable sharing what they felt or thought more frequently with the staff members. I found this to be extremely effective in being able to connect and interact with the residents."

Despite the staff's effective work and communication with residents, the student team also found that the facility was understaffed. While the facility seemed to run smoothly, the amount of upkeep work that some staff had to do could be overwhelming. The student who particularly had observed RMs pointed out that RMs took on too many responsibilities. From this student's view, RMs should be free from cleaning and security so that they can focus on the personal affairs of veterans which are crucial to the veterans' successes. Another student reported on meal preparation and delivery:

I have been coming during dinnertime hours and have been able to speed up the process tremendously by helping the staff members carry out the daily dinner tasks. If we can implement some type of volunteer program, either at the school or in the community in general, we may be able to provide help for the facility to be able to be more effective on upkeep. Sometimes it feels that some staff members have to juggle numerous tasks at once and could easily cause a task to be overlooked or not done properly. If we had more people during crucial times, like dinnertime for example, then we could easily keep operations running more effectively.

Staff usually fulfilled their duties while covering each other's work. Having volunteers more effectively and consistently or implementing a volunteer program would greatly assist staff with their daily responsibilities. Apparently, those staff needed to be supported so that they could focus on their own tasks. The use of volunteer labor could lead to an increase in the impact of the HSS program.

In addition, the students observed a disconnection or dissonance between weekday and weekend staff members. The student who had focused on security guards explained:

When I asked about female residents, I was given two completely different answers which made me confused on why there were two separate answers to such a basic question. The staff all need to be on the same page every single day for HSS to run efficiently. Having one person say one thing while another person says something completely different is quite frustrating and makes the facility not run as smoothly as it should.

Given this observation, the student team suggested that more effective strategies for creating open dialogues and smooth inter-staff communication should be implemented within the program. This way, staff could avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication. The student team recommended offering more professional training and meetings for all staff to share their information.

9. Community Partner's Reaction

The HSS director hoped to maintain a good quality of support service for homeless veterans and further develop the impact of the program in the community. The results from observations as well as secondary analysis of the resident demographic report were provided to HSS in order to support the development of assessment protocols that would measure the impact of the program and help to find areas for improvement.

The students and I were invited to an HSS advisory board meeting. The student team presented their findings and made five recommendations for improvement of the program:

1. Establish a clearer method of information sharing among staff;
2. Increase inter-staff communication between the weekday and the weekend staff;
3. Create more opportunities (such as gatherings) on a regular basis to acknowledge staff's efforts and experiences;
4. Develop a more cohesive strategy towards menu variability and meal production; and
5. Organize volunteers systematically and implement a consistent volunteer program.

According to the program director, this research report helped the program gather information on staff and volunteers and also identify potential areas for program improvement. The director specifically commented that “the recommendations were spot on” and “[w]e are slowly, yet steadily, implementing every one of these recommendations.” As a positive change, the program staff became more cohesive. The director and staff found that inter-communication between the weekday and weekend staff was greatly improved. Both verbal and written communications among HSS staff increased. Weekend staff mentioned that they became more aware of the day-to-day occurrences that happened throughout the week. In addition, staff voluntarily created “You Make a Difference” cards for the program residents as well as the staff. They also collected news items and staff’s accomplishments for the newsletter. Volunteer groups more frequently came to the facility to prepare food or drop off the food for the residents to cook on the grill.

The program director evaluated the quality of the students’ research activities and stated that “the project shows a much better picture of who we are, what we do and who we serve.” The program planned to implement every one of the recommendations that we had made. The director also noted that the report would be included in all their future grant applications. Moreover, this project report was also sent to HSS’s Executive team. The Executive team members were impressed with the report and even asked if we could continue to work together. These comments were absolutely rewarding to the students who engaged in this project because they were able to see the impact of their research efforts on program development.

10. Student Reflections about Homeless Veterans

The students enrolled in the research methods course discussed how to support HSS residents and help them reintegrate into the local community. The students emphasized that more conversations and interactions between civilians and veterans should be created, because of civilians’ insufficient understanding of veterans (PEW Research Center Social & Demographic Trends 2011). During the conversation, civilians can understand not only how much these veterans sacrificed

along the way but also how difficult it can be for many of them to re-acclimate back into society after they are deployed. Meanwhile, veterans also recognize expectations from their families, friends, and community partners and prepare for re-adjusting themselves to mainstream society. Such interactions can be easily created within the facility by accepting volunteers and student interns.

To increase civilians' communications with veterans, the students enrolled in the course further suggested that service-learning courses should be offered at the university. A student said, "Ultimately, these veterans need our collective help. It would be a good idea to design a service-learning course in which students can learn how to assist veterans in establishing and maintaining positive connections to individuals and groups in society." Through service-learning activities, students could possibly assist veterans with finding reasonable employment opportunities and filling out applications. Another student added that service-learning students could work with the veterans as a "buddy" for society. For example, the service-learning students could go with HSS residents and staff to a public place (e.g., a park, fair, and shopping mall) where the residents view different activities and possibly interact with various individuals. While spending time together, those students can be conversational partners or buddies with the veterans by giving some guidance to them.

The best way to help veterans regain dignity is to keep them civically engaged and help them rebuild confidence in themselves. The more time the veterans spend immersed in public activities, the more confident they can become. Receiving positive feedback from or being integrated into a civilian social group is highly valuable for the veterans because this public or societal integration or bond promotes their confidence and validates a veteran's normality. This process is key when veterans attempt to integrate themselves back into society. Creating and maintaining authentic social relationships with civilians would be one of the most effective forms of therapy since they might have had little or no such relationships prior to their deployment.

11. Conclusion

The students who were enrolled in the research methods course learned a great deal about the program's operation, staff's task preparation and performance, as well as the ways staff members communicate with residents. During the 16-week semester, the students were able to complete participant observations by following 12 staff members, provide analyses of the data collected from their field studies, and make suggestions for the program's improvement. As a result, the students gained a lot of benefits from the community-engaged research project at HSS. While the students built mutual trust and created positive relationships with staff, they also had meaningful interactions with the residents who were homeless. The students were able to see how their research activities and efforts were appreciated by these community partners.

Community-based projects benefited both students and community partners. Community research offered an opportunity for the students to develop their methodological skills by directly interacting with people in real-world settings. The agency, as a community partner, earned a better understanding of social research and how they might interpret and use assessment information for writing reports and grant proposals. To assure positive outcomes, I regularly held meetings with students and community partners during the research process. Because it was a class project, students were required to attend class meetings so that they could share and discuss any issues and concerns. Meanwhile, I visited the agency and met with the director and staff when clarifications and updates were needed. Also, the agency director, students, and faculty met for sharing and discussing midterm and final reports. This way, all involved people shared the same information.

Community-engaged research serves as an important foundation for establishing vital partnerships between students and potential clients. The field research described here certainly provided an opportunity for the students to apply sociological knowledge and skills. In addition, a community-based organization or program, as a research partner, may be able to address community priorities as well as its own issues and needs.

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