

# COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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*Principles and Practices*

Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth,  
Randy Stoecker, Patrick Donohue

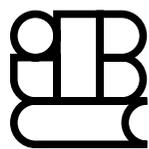


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*I thank Arden for her love, support,  
and encouragement over the years, and Asia and  
Maya for the joy that they bring to my life.—Nick*

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and my support in this work and in my life.  
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for modeling for me a life of service.—Sam*

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my wife, Donna, and my children—Patrick,  
James, and Catherine—for their steady supply  
of love, wisdom, support . . . and fun.—Patrick*

*To my main lifelines and favorite people,  
Kirkley and Nathan.—Kerry*

## FOREWORD

IF YOU THINK higher education in the United States should prepare students for active roles of reflective and committed citizenship in a multicultural and interracial democratic society, you will find this book important reading. If you realize that higher education is failing this role, you will treasure this book as a compass that points to the true north of academic reform and transformation.

The authors combine their years of experience with community-based research, in a broad range of higher education institutional settings, with systematic reflection. As a consequence, they make the case for community-based pedagogy and research, describe their methods, and outline operational options in detail. Their eye for specifics does not obscure a vision of human relationships and social justice enmeshed in education and research and expressed in trust of self, others, and the learning process. Their reflective practice makes it easier for faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education to understand community-based research in the evolution of recent educational reforms, such as service learning, and in the movement to a scholarship of engagement.

As I read these pages, conversations and events spanning three decades came to mind. I found in them echoes of campus turmoil, when students demand relevance in their education and social responsibility of their schools, and of numerous recent conferences, where college presidents called for the increased civic engagement of higher education.

The young star scholar of the department, where I was a graduate student, stormed out of his office complaining that the student protesters were making it impossible for him to work. The students had assembled to ask the board of trustees to put the university on record as opposed to the escalating war in Vietnam in 1972. As the departing academic pressed the elevator button, the department's administrative assistant tried to stop him with a pointed question. "You're not going anywhere. If you don't stay and make sense out of what's going on here, who's supposed to?"

The question did not deter him, he left.

Community-based research makes it more difficult for the faculty to excuse themselves from making sense of the public events and conditions

around them. Others have already stepped forward. We stood, and perhaps cheered, as students shook off some of their apathy and took up the mantle of community service in the 1980s through the Community Outreach Opportunity League. This new activism ignored faculty because it pointedly avoided integration with the curriculum. We welcomed, and perhaps supported, college and university presidents in Campus Compact as they fashioned commitments to community service and the public responsibilities of higher education. They made few demands on us as well because our presidents did not dare spend their political capital on campus urging changes in teaching and research.

It is our turn now. Only faculty can explain by example how higher education can answer the calls for the renewal of civil society heard around the world. This wonderful book explains how it came to be our turn, what we can do about it, and that we have many collaborators and partners as we learn to make meaning of the scholarship of engagement. We find here a clear explanation of the unique role that faculty can play to make higher education an improved part of our civic infrastructure.

Lois Marie Gibbs, the housewife turned activist, who organized her neighbors at Love Canal and confronted company and public officials about the illnesses and hardship their actions had caused, started the national Citizens Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste by the time I met her. I asked her how she handled campus partnerships in her work. She looked surprised and explained, "I don't find too many academics willing to jump over that wall to join us."

You will find in these pages plenty of evidence that many faculty and students have jumped and scaled the ivy-clad walls to join community partners in their efforts to increase and improve social services and to advocate for social justice. In the process, faculty-researchers have found the inadequacy of their disciplinary boundaries and research methodologies. We have had to devise and advocate new research approaches and new forms of accountability to people who address the social issues we study. We have had to reexamine the value-laden assumptions of objectivity and value-free scholarship. We have had to assert, as the authors do, that research *on and about* members of a community, especially a low-income community and without accountability to the members of that group, may "reproduce and legitimate" existing social arrangements of injustice and oppression.

Research efforts *for and with* community members, which "challenge and transform" existing social arrangements, simply bring to the forefront the issues of power and control inherent in all research. For example, my supervisor called me on the carpet and had the head of the Department of Family Medicine explain that "No self-respecting epidemiologist would

do this work” [a community-based epidemiological study I was conducting with the residents along Yellow Creek in Eastern Kentucky]. I made a case of our responsibility to the people who lived in the path of exposure as well as to the academic practice of epidemiology. I conceded on one point, however; we began calling the work a community health-risk appraisal. Eventually, that work assisted the residents in winning a state court settlement that established a health care trust fund to provide services and examination for communities, like their own, that had some health risk because of exposure to chemical hazards.

Some of my students and I visited a juvenile detention center, during the course of a study described in this book, to interview some of the detained juveniles. We had walked through security doors buzzing open and locking shut and through curious stares. After conducting interviews and once outside the center, one of the students observed, “They’re just like us. They’re smart. They want the same things that we do. I had the breaks to get them differently. With just a few changes, they could have been visiting me.”

Community-based research is about teaching and the cognitive and moral development of students. This student expressed the empathy that already distinguished her and this research reinforced. In addition to developing leadership traits such as empathy, when done well community-based research turns classrooms into learning communities. Imagine coming late to class and finding that the students had started without you because they had too much to cover. Or imagine a student asking, “Can’t we read more than a book every two weeks?” It can and has happened because community-based research, as the authors show, offers students adult responsibilities with real stakes.

The authors give fair warning, however; a learning community can be far messier than a command-and-control classroom. There may be times when the faculty, with a few devoted students if she is lucky, will have to salvage a project that did not work out as planned or finish a project that lasted longer than the semester. Even these times, however, offer opportunities for effective teaching and research to “challenge and transform” existing social arrangements including our classrooms.

When presented with a proposal for a center for civic engagement that would sponsor participatory action research and campus community partnerships, a university administrator objected, “We’re not a social service agency.”

Indeed, as these pages make clear, higher education is about teaching, research, and service, but this book also explains how to combine them effectively with community-based research. The book helps explain that community-based research does not impose a burden on the roles of higher

education but conveys a promise of their achievement. It explains that an expanded and improved role for higher education in the democratic civic infrastructure of participatory processes of problem solving offers students a path to engagement in their own learning and faculty a vital new avenue to renewed scholarship. And in a feature not to be discounted, advocates of community-based pedagogies and research will find charts, illustrations, and talking points to use in faculty workshops on their campuses or to use in convincing skeptical administrators, a dwindling group.

In the last analysis, this is a very dangerous book, not because it deters higher education from its mission but because it offers us a way to deliver on its promise to prepare students for active roles of reflective and committed citizenship in a multicultural and interracial democratic society. It is a dangerous book also because it challenges those of us in higher education to blend our disciplinary training with interdisciplinary inquiry that is both rigorous and relevant. It is dangerous because these problems require us to regain a sense of our creativity and to make a future for higher education that is better and more effective than its present practice.

These dangers and problems echo another fragment of conversation from the past. Paulo Freire, in an interview I conducted, urged that we make the future a problem. When we “problematize” the future, he suggested, we renew our human agency over the possible futures that we can create. In this sense, the authors have created a problem for us, fortunately. They have restored to our hands the capacity, responsibility, and possibility to shape a better future for higher education. They also distill and summarize a great deal of the scholarship of teaching, which gives us direction. They do so without offering recipes for success, which gives us the challenge to find our own agency. They provide an ideal while allowing for our limits in its pursuit. That combination offers hope for the future of higher education and for our own efficacy and effectiveness in its transformation.

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## PREFACE

WE HAVE ALL HEARD the litany of critical voices expressing frustration with higher education as it is perceived and practiced in the United States today.

Here is what some students have to say:

“I get so bored sitting in a classroom, taking notes all the time. Why can’t professors figure out a way to get us more interested in what they are trying to teach? And what does this stuff have to do with the real world? Why can’t we study things that I can really use?”

“Just volunteering doesn’t seem to be enough. I’ve been tutoring this little boy three days a week. By Friday, I see a change, but by Monday we’re back to square one. He’s dealing with too many other problems—in his neighborhood, in his school. What can I do that will make a real difference for him, and for others like him?”

“I really like my major, and I know what I’m learning will help me get started on a great career. But I also want to be able to use what I know to make the world somehow better for others. How can I do that with what I am learning here?”

Faculty members have concerns too:

“I want to be an effective teacher, an active researcher, and also to contribute to the community on and off campus. At my institution, it is just about impossible to do all three well. Is there some way I can integrate all three of those—teaching, scholarship, and service—so as to help my career and give me a sense of accomplishment at the same time?”

“I know active learning is best and that students should be developing a sense of commitment and caring about others—so lots of my students are involved in service-learning. I do my best to provide opportunities for reflection and to connect their service with the course material. But is their community service really giving

them the knowledge and skills they need to become effective, committed, active citizens? And how much are they doing to address real community problems?”

“I went into higher education because I thought I could make some sort of difference. Instead, my research seems to have no value except to my own career and no relevance to anyone other than colleagues in my own discipline who have the same interests that I do. I want my work to be more useful and meaningful than that—to serve some sort of wider public good. But I still haven’t figured out how I can make that happen.”

Community-based organizations and service providers need help with their work, and they see local educational institutions as a possibility:

“We need help. We are under constant pressure to come up with new sources of money to support our work. That means having lots of hard data—about what grants are out there, what our community needs, how well our programs are working, and what the demand for our services will be down the road. You have lots of people who do research, don’t you? Can’t you give us a hand?”

“We’re tired of being ignored by policymakers. We have people we are trying to serve, but policies keep changing and we have to keep rethinking what we’re doing. They don’t even ask us what we think of welfare-to-work! How can we get them to listen to us?”

“Where have you been? You’ve been aloof and distant and not too useful for us. Your university is the largest institution in our community, and a lot of resources go to you. Why don’t we see any of it?”

“Student volunteers are great, because Lord knows we need help just getting things done—serving soup, mentoring kids, answering phones, running our after-school program. But this community has so many problems and needs that just aren’t being addressed. How can you help us with those?”

Other community members seek a different kind of relationship with colleges and universities than they have had in the past:

“Researchers from the university come in here all the time with their clipboards and pencils, and I’m getting sick of being asked how poor I am. I’m fed up with being treated as a guinea pig. I’m