

October 2012

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Recommended Citation

Bowen, Glenn A. (2012) "Book Review: Defining Community-Based Research," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol5/iss2/10>

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Defining Community-Based Research

Reviewed by Glenn A. Bowen

Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Randy Stoecker, and Patrick Donohue, *Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, 304 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7879-6205-0

Community engagement wears many faces. In higher education, its familiar faces include service learning, public service, advocacy and civic activism, social entrepreneurship, and engaged scholarship. Community engagement, or civic engagement, has now emerged in the guise of community-based research (CBR).

Although CBR has long been employed in addressing social challenges (Beckman, Penney, & Cockburn, 2011), it has only recently taken its place among pedagogical and scholarly approaches to civic engagement. Indeed, CBR is viewed as an extension or enhancement of service learning (DeBlasis, 2006; Kowalewski, 2004) – the pedagogy that integrates relevant community service into the curriculum – and as scholarly work by faculty (Wade & Demb, 2009).

On the face of it, CBR is simply research based in a community. Accordingly, many researchers may claim that they have been doing CBR for years. However, there is more to CBR than meets the eye. That much is clear from even a cursory glance at *Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices*.

Coauthors Kerry Strand, Sam Marullo, Nick Cutforth, Randy Stoecker, and Patrick Donohue elucidate the concept of community-based research, touch on its theoretical underpinnings, provide several examples of the methodology in practice, and document its benefits. They present CBR as research *with* and *for* (not *on* and not merely *in*) the community. Furthermore, they champion CBR not only as a research methodology but also as a teaching technique and an institutional strategy for social justice.

In the foreword, Richard Couto points to an important challenge that the book offers – a challenge for faculty “to blend ... disciplinary training with interdisciplinary inquiry that is both rigorous and relevant” (p. xvi). Readers may connect his name to participatory action research (e.g., Couto, 2000), which is one of several terms used to describe the kind of research promoted in this book. The focus on faculty as the primary audience for this book speaks volumes about how far CBR has come. Traditional academic research is, by and large, an individual enterprise that concentrates on the science of discovery – that is, investigation in search of new knowledge. In contrast, CBR is a collaborative enterprise in which research questions emerge from the needs of communities and in which faculty and students along with community members become engaged in a research process that seeks to create social change.

Community-Based Research and Higher Education is divided into 10 chapters, beginning with the origins and principles of CBR and ending with a look to the future. In Chapter 1, Strand and her colleagues attribute CBR’s emergence as a response largely to widespread criticism that higher education was insufficiently responsive to the needs of communities. CBR, they suggest, is also a response to the growing realization that higher education had failed to prepare students for lives of civic engagement and social responsibility. The authors define CBR as “a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change” (p. 3). They outline three major principles of CBR: campus–community collaboration; validation of multiple sources of knowledge, discovery, and dissemination; and social action/social change to achieve social justice. The

social justice goal makes CBR distinctive. No wonder that, in defining community, the authors emphasize that it consists of people who are oppressed, powerless, economically deprived, and disenfranchised. CBR, as the authors suggest, provides an avenue to the empowerment of underserved communities and marginalized people.

Chapters 2 and 3 draw attention to campus-community partnerships as the foundation for the collaboration that sets CBR apart from traditional research. In describing the benefits derived by the community, Chapter 2 focuses on how CBR collaboration can help community-based organizations achieve their social change objectives. This chapter also delineates 10 principles of successful community-campus partnerships. In this regard, it offers nothing new, except perhaps the emphasis on shared power as the basis for good research to achieve social justice outcomes. Suggesting how to turn those principles into effective practice, Chapter 3 offers the nuts and bolts of CBR partnerships in terms of finding or starting a partnership, facilitating the collaborative process, and achieving long-term goals.

Chapter 4 examines the ways in which the principles of CBR shape the design and conduct of this kind of research. The authors discuss (a) collaboration, including barriers to collaboration; (b) creation and dissemination of knowledge, including the recognition and validation of sources of knowledge that are often not legitimized by conventional research approaches; and (c) contributions to social change. To their credit, Strand et al. present CBR not as a remedy for social ills but rather as a dynamic research approach with a social change emphasis that “is a particularly difficult transition for academic researchers to make” (p. 83). As the authors assert, academics interested in CBR must adopt a new paradigm of research that considers the value and relevance, and not only the validity, of the research findings.

Chapter 5 covers strategies for addressing challenges that may arise at each stage of the research process. Familiar research methods may need to be modified and new methods employed. In the process of conducting the research, both campus and community partners stand to benefit from the transformative effects of unanticipated learning.

The next two chapters are devoted to CBR in relation to teaching. The authors – faculty members from sociology, political science, and education – provide a sound rationale for viewing

CBR as a teaching strategy. However, service-learning practitioners may take issue with the authors’ veiled criticism of their work as charity-oriented. After all, service learning does have social change goals and, properly pursued, is not any less rigorous or less relevant than CBR.

In Chapter 8, “Organizing for Community-Based Research,” campus-based administrative structures and management issues are explored. The authors recommend that CBR be assigned to an entity within an academic unit. As a follow-up in Chapter 9, they offer practical suggestions regarding the operation of a CBR center. In addition, they address the question of sustainability of CBR work and indicate the importance of rewarding faculty who embrace this kind of research.

The 304-page book closes with an invitation for readers to share the authors’ vision of higher education based on research-oriented campus-community partnerships. Such partnerships are seen as sustained, reciprocal, and transformative as institutions support communities in realizing a more just society.

Community-Based Research and Higher Education makes a major contribution to the community engagement literature. It makes clear the epistemological advantages of CBR and shows how research can respond to community needs as much as it can satisfy researchers’ interests. Readers will appreciate the many examples of CBR projects drawn from diverse institutional and social settings. Readers would appreciate even more something that is missing – a complete CBR case study, detailing such elements as identification of the research question; the specific roles of the research partners, including students and community members; the problems faced and overcome as part of the research process; and the dissemination and use of the research results. Nevertheless, this is a very valuable book, replete with insights and guidelines for CBR practice in higher education. It is recommended reading for faculty and civic engagement administrators and an excellent resource for preparing students for active, engaged citizenship.

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