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Promoting Engaged Scholarship Among Undergraduate University Students

Jenni Owen, Leslie M. Babinski, and David Rabiner

Abstract

The School Research Partnership (SRP) is an engaged scholarship program that promotes collaboration among undergraduate students, community partners, and university advisors. In this case study, we describe the Research Consultation Project (RCP), an undergraduate student independent study project that uses a community-based research approach to connect students, faculty, and community partners to help address critical societal issues. In the RCP, undergraduate students function as research consultants for representatives of local school districts or leaders of other community agencies and organizations such as a county commissioner or a nonprofit focused on post-secondary education opportunities for youth. The students work under the supervision of an advisor to address questions posed by the policymaker or practitioner. RCP meets different but complementary needs of the students and partners in ways that bridge student academic and applied learning, research, policy, and practice.

Introduction

During the past 10 years, research universities have renewed their commitment to prioritizing community involvement in a number of significant ways (Stanton, 2008; Campus Compact, 2016). In an effort to develop productive connections with their publics, universities have developed new programs to help students develop civic skills and encourage faculty to pursue research that can address critical “social, economic, political, and environmental issues” (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 164). According to a report by Campus Compact, the four critical areas for engagement at research universities include engaged scholarship, scholarship on civic and community engagement, the education of students for civic and community engagement, and the institutionalization of civic engagement (Stanton, 2008). An increased emphasis on engaging in public scholarship to bridge the gap between scholarly research and practice (Bridger & Alter, 2006) is promoted as benefiting the community, the university, and the students. In this case study report, we describe an effort at Duke University that promotes engaged scholarship by connecting students, faculty, and community partners to help address critical societal issues. Consistent with the university’s commitment to “enhance the creation, delivery, and translation of knowledge for a rapidly changing world” (see <https://strategicplan.duke.edu/initiatives/>) engaged scholarship provides an opportunity to integrate the research, teaching, and service missions of the university by collaborating with schools, nonprofit organizations, and other community agencies.

Engaged Scholarship

The Campus Compact report on civic engagement and research universities (Stanton, 2008) highlights three dimensions of engaged research: purpose, process, and product. The purpose of the engagement is to benefit the community, and as such, the research question should be generated by community members to address an issue of significant importance in their work settings. The process focuses on the collaboration between the researchers and the practitioners and the product refers to the usefulness or practical importance of the outcomes.

The increased emphasis on the value of engaged scholarship is reflected in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s classification for community engagement. One aspect of this is curricular engagement, which is defined as “teaching, learning, and scholarship [that] engage faculty, students, and the community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration” (Stanton, 2008, p. 21). In 1996, Boyer noted “universities are now suffering from a decline in public confidence (p. 11)” and encouraged the scholarship of engaging and connecting the work and resources of the university to “our most pressing social, civil, and ethical problems” (Boyer, 1996, p. 19). Addressing important societal issues is still relevant today in higher education, and in 2016, universities that are members of the Campus Compact renewed their commitment to “ensuring that our teaching, research, and institutional actions contribute to the public good” (Campus Compact, 2016).

In a recent review of engaged scholarship, Beaulieu, Breton, and Bousselle (2018) found two values that serve as the foundation for engagement: social justice and citizenship. In their review of 20 years of engaged scholarship, the scholars highlight the importance of working with community partners as active collaborators to ensure that research addresses a concern in the real world. This type of engaged scholarship, often called community-based research, is defined as “collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students, and community members in projects that address a community-identified need” (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003, p. 5). Community-based research has been used to address societal issues representing a range of disciplinary perspectives from public health (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006) and physical therapy (Xia, Stone, Hoffman, & Klappa, 2016; George, Wood-Kanupka, & Oriel, 2017), to ecology (Watterson, Dunbar, Terlecki, Nielsen, Ratmansky, Persichetti, A., Travers, & Gill, 2011) and psychology (Collins, Clifasefi, Stanton, the LEAP Advisory Board, Straits, Gil-Kashiwabara, Straits, Espinosa, Nicasio, Andrasik, Hawes, Miller, Nelson, Orfaly, Duran, & Wallerstein, 2018), as well as general research methods (Arantes do Amaral & Lino dos Santo, 2018).

The School Research Partnership (SRP) is an example of engaged scholarship that promotes collaboration among university students, community partners, and faculty advisors to address societal issues related to children and families. The SRP is housed at the Center for Child and Family Policy in the Sanford School of Public Policy. Emphasizing bridges between basic research and policy as well as practice, the Center’s mission is to generate solutions to important problems affecting children and families.

This article highlights a core component of the School Research Partnership, the Research Consultation Project, in which undergraduate students partner with a community client and a university advisor to conduct an applied research project. In the RCP, school district leaders and nonprofit organization directors identify key issues that would benefit from timely, focused research to inform their decision-making. Undergraduates develop focused and responsive policy and practice research deliverables and present those to the policymakers and practitioners. This approach differs from other client-based research projects in

that it is not integrated into a course, but rather coordinated as part of a group of independent study projects with common goals for addressing a need in the community. Students benefit from one-on-one mentoring from their advisor in addition to peer support during small group sessions on common issues. This effort, using a community-based research approach to promote engaged scholarship, is one example of several types of engaged scholarship at the university. The RCP is interdisciplinary and focuses on collaboration with a community client that serves children and families.

Background of the Research Consultation Project

The RCP grew out of two sets of needs: the needs expressed by school district leaders at the school board, central administration, and school levels and those expressed by undergraduate students. Policymakers and practitioners such as the RCP’s school system partners want and need access to research, yet typically receive it in forms that are not accessible or user-friendly from their perspective. Students are aware that much of the research they do is not applicable to the “real” worlds of policy and practice. The School Research Partnership has capitalized on the potential to develop a mutually beneficial match between school district representatives and students that addresses both sets of needs.

This match between community leader and student researcher also serves to address another problem: the widely acknowledged gap in engaged research (Stanton, 2008). RCP provides an avenue for bridging research with policy and practice by starting with the concerns and needs of policymakers and practitioners, and using student-generated, expert-advised research to inform those concerns.

Three local school districts along with about a dozen nonprofit education organizations have been community partners for RCPs. The districts are a mix of large and small districts, rural and urban, and with high- and low-resource students and schools. Combined, they provide a virtually endless source of real-world issues for their leaders to grapple with and for students to address. Moreover, they are accessible both geographically and with regard to organizational structure, making it possible to establish and maintain long-term working relationships with policy and practice partners in a range of institutions and roles.

Description of the Research Consultant Projects

As noted previously, the RCP addresses three systemic problems: 1) challenges that policymakers and practitioners face with acquiring research when they need it and in forms they can use; 2) challenges that students face in carrying out research that has real-world value; and 3) the gaps between research and policy/practice. While these are the overall systemic challenges that the RCP addresses, the individual student/community partner projects address a wide range of specific problems that the partners have identified as being of current concern. The projects, all research-based, range from topics such as best practices for exceptional children's programs, to approaches to reduce high school dropout, to best practices for reducing truancy.

Topic identification. In advance of each semester, SRP directors solicit school districts' and other partners' requests for topics that the partners would like a student to examine. There are usually more topic requests than the SRP can accommodate in one semester, a testament to the value of the RCPs. SRP directors narrow the list of requests based on the feasibility of projects, the goal of maintaining a diverse group of partners, advisor expertise, and students' areas of interest. Some partners participate nearly every semester, while others participate less often; thus with respect to the mix of partners, each semester has included those with knowledge of the RCPs as well as new partners. This combination has served to maintain continuity while at the same time expanding and diversifying the partner pool.

Student recruitment. Also prior to the beginning of each semester, the SRP co-directors publicize the RCP opportunity through faculty colleagues, prior RCP participants, and to all students in departments such as public policy and psychology. Students apply to the RCP via an online application form and provide a statement of interest, a résumé, and the name of a faculty member who will serve as a reference. Each of these items helps to assess whether a student's stated interest and motivation fit with project expectations. The information students provide about their academic focus and their reasons for being interested in the RCP opportunity also provide important insight on how effectively the student is likely to communicate with external partners, which is a critical aspect of the project work.

RCP advisors. The third pre-semester component concerns advisors, which the SRP directors also confirm in advance of each semester. As with partners, the mix of advisors is often different from one semester to the next. Since the inception of the RCP, 16 different faculty/researcher advisors have guided students. The advisors' areas of expertise include public policy, developmental psychology, public administration, education counseling, and sociology. All but one advisor has worked with multiple RCP students, bringing increased knowledge about the goals and process of the projects that benefits the students and partners alike.

To determine optimal partner/student matches, students and advisors rank their preferences from among the requested topics that the SRP directors have determined are feasible. The directors use this input to make the best possible matches.

In conjunction with announcing the matches, students, partners, and advisors receive a written description of the RCP and expectations for each member of the partner/student/advisor team. Partners, for example, are informed that their student may need assistance facilitating contact with individuals whom the partners recommend the students speak with to obtain valuable information about the partner's topic area or to access data that would be helpful in completing their work.

Finalizing consultation projects. Following the confirmation of each student/partner/advisor team, each team meets in person or by phone as soon as possible. At this point, students typically have a brief description of the partner's research request and what the partner hopes to learn from and do with the project deliverables. Thus, this initial three-way meeting serves to clarify the research topic and the related questions being posed, and to narrow the scope to ensure feasibility for a one-semester project. The first meeting also serves to establish an agreed-upon process for communication and interaction between the partner and student throughout the semester. Students are directed to inquire about their partner's preferred method of communication (e.g. whether for phone, email, or in person) as well as how often they would like updates, whom to include on written communication, and other considerations that have implications for professional and productive interaction between the students and community partners. Students

provide their partner and advisor a detailed description of the proposed scope of work no later than two weeks after the initial student/partner/advisor meeting. At that point, partners either convey their approval of how the project has been defined or ask questions to help further refine the scope and plan. The goal is to develop a project that meets partners' needs and that the student can reasonably complete within a one-semester timeframe. Projects may last for two semesters if that is best for the topic. A two-semester project might involve the same student throughout or two different students, one each semester.

Program expectations. With regard to student/advisor interaction, advisors and students must meet a minimum of once every two weeks, though they often meet weekly. The RCP respects advisors' different styles and preferences for how best to advise the individual students and their projects. The promise of deliverables to third-party professionals, however, has led the RCP to standardize project expectations more than is typically the case for independent studies.

Throughout the semester, students provide updates to the partners based on the agreed-upon plan for each team. Some projects include components that require partner review and approval, e.g., surveys or interview questionnaires, while others require minimal ongoing input from the partner. Partners are informed that the student/partner interaction component of the RCP is critical not only to the quality of the final products but also for the students' educational and professional development.

The SRP directors have served as RCP advisors and are available to provide guidance to any member of any team throughout the semester. Students and advisors consult the directors regularly, taking advantage of the directors' institutional knowledge and their experience working with many different students, partners, and advisors.

Peer learning and feedback. Four group meetings complement the student/advisor meetings that occur throughout the semester. The group meetings occur approximately 2, 6, 10, and 12 weeks into the 14-week semester. All students must attend each of the four meetings and multiple advisors attend as well. At each meeting, students are invited to raise questions regarding project expectations and progress. Each meeting has a theme and covers specific content.

During the first group meeting, students present their topics and plans for accomplishing what the partner has requested. The students pose questions to their peers, their advisor, and other advisors about any early or foreseen challenges. During the second group meeting, students provide brief summaries of their progress to date and receive feedback from their peers, their advisor, and other advisors. Students receive instruction on writing a literature review, which is particularly valuable to the students, as many have had little or no prior experience with synthesizing research.

In the third group meeting, students receive training on writing for policy and practice audiences, often the first time that students have received specific guidance about how to write for a community partner. This is also the meeting at which students receive guidance about producing a conference-quality poster for the end-of-year presentations event. For the final group meeting, each student and advisor receives a set of draft student policy briefs to review and comment on. This session has proved invaluable as students receive peer and instructor feedback on their own policy brief while also benefiting from contributing to and hearing the feedback on their peers' briefs. This is a meaningful session not only for the content shared but also for the way in which it exposes students to a strategy for giving and receiving constructive criticism in a thoughtful, productive way, an experience that is all too rare at their phase of educational and professional development.

Project deliverables. Students produce at least two and at times three distinct deliverables as part of the RCP. All students produce a substantial research paper (20–25 pages) on the partner's requested topic, at minimum an in-depth review and synthesis of related literature reflecting the current state of knowledge in the field, and may include survey or interview data and analyses conducted by the student. Also, they write an action-oriented brief (5–7 pages) that summarizes the key issues for the partner in a succinct manner, along with recommendations, if appropriate. Some also produce a conference-quality poster that highlights research findings and recommendations. SRP hosts a poster session and dinner event at the end of the school year that is attended by community partners, students, advisors, university faculty, and other community members. This cross-sector convening is an important part of the

community building that supports the sustainability of the program. In the past two years, over 50 individuals representing schools, nonprofits, government, and community institutions have attended.

While completion of these products fulfills project requirements, many partners invite the student to present his or her findings to the partner's organization. This opportunity increases the likelihood that the students' work will be used and it is valuable to their academic and professional development. For example, students have presented their final products to school district leaders, nonprofit staff, and school board members. To summarize, these deliverables address the needs that the RCP seeks to meet and the gap that the projects help bridge: students conducting real world, applicable research; community partners receiving responses to their requests for research that is accessible and timely; a narrowing of the research-policy and research-practice gaps.

Examples of Student Research Consultation Projects

Since the inception of the RCP in fall 2009, 65 students have completed the RCP. The RCP has worked with over 17 different partners and covers a wide range of topics related to children and families. Recent projects include a focus on parent engagement in school, best practices for English Language Learners, an evaluation of a peer-tutoring program, educational issues for students with eating disorders, and strategies for closing the achievement gap.

Impact of the Research Consultation Project

Each semester we evaluate the project impact through feedback from students, advisors, and community partners. Students and advisors provide feedback anonymously through an online survey. The evaluation survey asks respondents to rank learning objectives of the RCP based on perceived importance to the project. The evaluations also request feedback on the four group meetings, which as described previously, include specific skills trainings and peer and advisor input on each project. These evaluations have been part of the course evaluation to inform continuous improvement. The authors obtained Institutional Review Board approval to compile and report these evaluations retrospectively.

Students rate the degree to which the RCP contributed to their progress on a number of learning objectives on a scale from "not at all" to

"very highly." The learning objectives that have been rated highly according to students from the past four semesters include: 1) learning to synthesize and integrate knowledge; 2) learning to apply knowledge, concepts, principles, or theories to a specific situation or problem; 3) learning to conduct inquiry through methods of the field; and 4) developing writing skills. For example, one student said, "This has been the perfect next-step in my academic and career path by combining my interests in policy and in education." Other students, highlighting the opportunity to interact with community clients, said, "Meeting the client and using the client as a case study made the research much more meaningful" and "from this experience I learned a lot about thinking on my feet, and when to ask the right questions." The importance of faculty support in navigating the research process was mentioned by a student who said, "I greatly appreciated the variety of feedback from the advisors. It was input that was always used and they frequently were aware of things that I was not, even after researching into my topic."

Two-thirds of the school and community partners participated in the evaluation survey during the 2014–2015 school year. The most valuable activities cited by partners included finalizing the research question with the student and obtaining information from the student's work during the final stages. Partners also indicated that the research paper and policy brief were highly valuable final products. One partner mentioned that gathering data from stakeholders was an important part of the process and said, "The methodology used by the student served our purpose very well. The focus group model provided valuable feedback for us with regard to the success of our long-range plan." Another partner noted the personal qualities of the student and her initiative and said, "The most impressive and helpful benefit was her motivation and organization..." She used some grant funds to travel to additional facilities with similar programs to assist in her research, giving the project greater relevance.

Eight of the 10 most recent advisors provided feedback on the evaluation survey. Advisors rated the in-person meetings between the student, community partner, and advisor as the most important component for the success of the project. Learning objectives that were important to the advisors included: 1) learning to analyze ideas, arguments, and points of view, 2) learning to synthesize and integrate knowledge, and 3) gaining

experience working with a client. When asked for suggestions for improving SRP, advisors recommended more time on how to write the policy brief and literature review as well as additional time on developing a focus group or interview protocol. All SRP advisors indicated that they were likely to or possibly would continue to serve as an advisor.

Engaged Scholarship: Purpose, Process, and Product

The overall goal of the RCP is to use a community-based research approach to facilitate engaged scholarship. The three dimensions of engaged research—purpose, process, and product (Stanton, 2008)—are evident in the RCP. The RCPs provide community partners with research-based information that they do not have the capacity or time to obtain and provide students with experience researching issues of current concern to real-world policymakers and practitioners. Grounded in research, SRP takes the generation and application of knowledge beyond classrooms and data sets, thereby providing opportunities for the dissemination and use of research. To this end, a desired outcome of the RCP is to share reliable information and strategies to improve community-based decision-making and action.

The tangible products of this engaged scholarship include the useable deliverables that each student produces: a research paper, a memo or brief highlighting policy and/or practice recommendations, and a conference-quality poster reflecting a combination of the research findings and related recommendations. There are intangible products as well, including integrated knowledge development and professional development stemming from both casual and formal interaction between student and partner. The client-focused research and writing, oral presentation, and peer and professional feedback components of the RCP combine to create a unique but straightforward and replicable model for university/community engagement.

This process of responding to a community partner's request for research is summed up by Watterson et al. (2011), who describe their community-based research as shifting "our pedagogies from what is done in (or for) the community to how learning is framed, implemented, and disseminated both with and alongside various community constituencies" (p. 8).

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

RCP presents a number of challenges, which we address each semester while also striving to put a lasting plan in place for addressing the challenges long-term. We briefly describe four challenges and our efforts to address them.

Partners' choice of topics may not be of high interest to the project advisors or a strong fit with advisors' research agendas. Thus far, we have recruited advisors in part by making the case that while the project topic may not be directly in their specific line of research, the benefit may be in the development of relationships that could lead to future opportunities. One solution would be to build on existing partnerships between faculty and community organizations.

For some advisors, however, the RCP provides an opportunity to make a new community connection. In some situations when the researchers do not have direct experience with the topic or community partner, they are able to support the students based on their expertise with students in defining a problem, conducting a literature review to answer research questions, and sharing their findings with a community client. More recent opportunities for engaged scholarship at the university include multi-year applied projects that include a long-term relationship with a community partner. This newer initiative, called Bass Connections, builds on faculty connections to engage students and community partners in ongoing research (see Brewster, Pisani, Ramseyer, & Wise, 2016, for an example).

Another challenge is the level of engagement of the community partner. We recommend that each student meet in person with her or his partner at least twice during the semester but that is not always feasible given partners' schedules and their desired level of interaction. To compensate for the possibility of infrequent interaction, we ask advisors to strongly encourage or require their students to develop a clear timeline for their project that includes check-ins with partners. We do this recognizing that check-ins may include a combination of in-person, telephone, and email communication. It is important to strike the correct balance of including the community member as a true partner, and not have the students' needs and short timeline become a burden. Finding ways to facilitate more frequent and meaningful interactions between students, advisors, and community partners would strengthen the experience.

Related to this second challenge, the most engaged partners have typically been those who

have selected their projects directly, rather than had the topic and student assigned to them by a supervisor. Over the 12 semesters of the RCP, the process for identifying projects has varied. Initially project topics within one school system came from individual district administrators. Those administrators requested the topics and served as the community contact for the student. That process shifted under one superintendent who preferred to generate the list of topics within the central office and then assign responsibility to central administration staff. A positive aspect of this process was that the superintendent approved topics that were priority areas for the school district. A challenge this presented, however, was that the staff member assigned to work with the student was not always personally invested in the topic. It appears that this may at times have had a somewhat negative impact on the partner's engagement with the student and interest in the final product. Ideally, the community partner who works directly with the student would have a clear idea of how they will use the information provided by the student, and be invested in learning the answer to the research question. This investment would also increase the likelihood that the recommendations suggested by the student will be implemented. Since most of the projects are just one semester long, the student and faculty are often not aware of the degree of implementation of the recommendations. In most cases, ongoing collaboration with community partners is necessary to support implementation of recommendations.

The final challenge concerns how we select students to participate in RCP. We believe that most are genuinely interested in education and particularly motivated to carry out a project that has the potential for real-world impact. Others, however, may believe that an independent study requires less work than a standard course. When we sensed this, we began stating clearly and at the outset of the semester before students are required to commit, that the RCP is not by any means an "easy A" and that for most students it would in fact require the development and use of new skills such as communicating professionally with policymakers and practitioners, data collection, and a literature review.

Each of these challenges is important; none are insurmountable. RCP directors have found it to be critical to communicate the potential for these challenges and possible strategies for addressing them to all members of the RCP partnership—students, partners, and advisors. This clarity of communication and being careful not to minimize

potential pitfalls continues to serve the RCP well.

Elements of the program we consider successful, and that we would recommend to others interested in starting a similar program, include the common sessions with all the students, the close contact with the faculty advisors, the emphasis on products that are useful to community partners, and the opportunity for the students to present their findings in a community forum.

Students and faculty seemed to appreciate the opportunity for group sessions to discuss areas of common interest, such as conducting literature reviews, writing policy briefs, and providing one another with peer feedback. Although each project had a different focus, the common elements and struggles were evident and provided a supportive environment for engaging in the community-based research project.

Our relationships with the faculty advisors were also valuable as we ran into roadblocks or challenges, either with the students or with the community partner. Challenges often included not having enough time to gather data from community stakeholders, or issues in gaining permission to access administrative data for analysis. Working closely with both advisors and community partners, we realized that setting the stage for a feasible project with a likelihood of being completed in one semester was an important step.

As part of the process, students produced a research paper and a policy or research brief as described previously. Writing for a variety of stakeholder audiences is challenging for the students but ensured that their products would contribute to the partners' decision-making or thinking about their topic. Similarly, the opportunity to present their findings in a university/community event at the end of the semester provided a tangible goal for clearly communicating both the issue and their findings.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The RCP offers an opportunity to engage with policy and practice officials in ways that differ from other research opportunities available to students in that it is a coordinated independent study project with faculty and peer support. It requires students to develop and use research and critical thinking skills in the context of addressing issues of immediate relevance and importance to community leaders. The RCP provides undergraduate students and their university advisors opportunities to participate in engaged scholarship (Stanton, 2008) and to strengthen collaboration among the researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Research Consultation Projects are successfully meeting students' and community partners' complementary needs in ways that bridge student academic and applied learning, research, policy, and practice. The RCPs address the students' need for academic work on real-world challenges and community partners' need for research expertise to inform and improve their work. Given the community partners' desire for these productive partnerships, the wealth of expertise at the university across several disciplines that are relevant to K–12 education, and Duke University's commitment to "the translation of knowledge," the RCP is an example of engaged scholarship for students, faculty, and community members. Compared with when we initiated the RCP, students now have many opportunities to engage in community-based research. One such initiative at this university is the Bass Connections program, which includes the goal of engaging with community partners using research to address societal issues. The education and human development theme in Bass Connections is particularly well suited to address interdisciplinary issues related to children and families (see <https://bassconnections.duke.edu/about>). Integrating independent study projects in ongoing university initiatives, such as Bass Connections, may provide the infrastructure necessary for the sustainability of community-based research with undergraduate students.

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