Academic Incentives for Faculty Participation in Community-based Participatory Research

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Recognizing the need to overcome the obstacles of traditional university- and discipline-oriented research approaches, a variety of incentives to promote community-based participatory research (CBPR) are presented. Experiences of existing CBPR researchers are used in outlining how this methodological approach can appeal to faculty: the common ground shared by faculty and community leaders in challenging the status quo; opportunities to have an impact on local, regional, and national policy; and opening doors for new research and funding opportunities. Strategies for promoting CBPR in universities are provided in getting CBPR started, changing institutional practices currently inhibiting CBPR, and institutionalizing CBPR. Among the specific strategies are: development of faculty research networks; team approaches to CBPR; mentoring faculty and students; using existing national CBPR networks; modifying tenure and promotion guidelines; development of appropriate measures of CBPR scholarship; earmarking university resources to support CBPR; using Institutional Review Boards to promote CBPR; making CBPR-oriented faculty appointments; and creating CBPR centers.

KEY WORDS: community-based participatory research; collaborative research; policy research; evaluation research; faculty development.


A combination of traditionalism and turf protection plays a significant part in the academy’s resistance to encouraging the development of the various forms of community-based participatory research (CBPR). Although university faculty generally see themselves as among the more open-minded and progressive forces in our society, at the same time they are more likely to be the defenders of constraining academic traditions. These are traditions related to who defines the research issues, how research is done, and how research outcomes are used. Discipline-defined and driven research is the norm and is seen as the “highest standard” of research. University-based departments and professional schools—the local outposts of national and international disciplines—are typically the arbiters of who has the appropriate knowledge to define researchable issues and who is qualified to do research.

Community-based participatory research represents a challenge to these traditions. However, most of us who use CBPR do not see it as a replacement for traditional, discipline-driven research; rather, we see this as complementary to traditional research. By effectively tapping community knowledge, CBPR is particularly effective for gaining insights into persistent social problems and developing solutions. For this same reason, some traditional academics see CBPR as a radical approach because it recognizes that the knowledge of individuals outside of academia can be equally as important in defining, guiding, and completing research as the knowledge inside academia. Traditional research can be compared to an old-fashioned marriage, where the husband has more power and resources than the wife. In this case the university uses its power to call the shots in the relationship with the community. In contrast, CBPR resembles a more modern egalitarian marriage. When university and community get together, they recognize that they each have resources and responsibilities in the relationship. Both parties see that this marriage of community-knowledge and discipline-based knowledge as critical to understanding pressing problems and doing credible research.

This article examines the academic barriers to conducting CBPR, particularly those that discourage faculty from engaging in such research. How can these barriers be eliminated? How can we motivate faculty and provide incentives for them to engage in participatory research? Are there successful research center models that nurture CBPR inside and outside of academia? What roles can government agencies and funders play in encouraging CBPR and other community-anchored approaches to research?

BARRIERS TO CONDUCTING COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

There is a strong undercurrent of tradition in most universities and colleges that helps to maintain the status quo and inhibit the adoption of innovative research models. First, academic departments and professional schools are
very protective of their turf. This is not only the case in their interaction with each other, but also when they interact with the community. The thought that community members might have something to say in defining, guiding and completing research is not part of the traditional academic research model. Research agendas are supposed to be shaped by one's disciplines, not the community. Middle ground is not the option.

Second, this distance from the community is partially justified by the notion that the community is naturally biased in protecting its self-interest. The assumption is that academic disciplines and professional schools are more objective and free from the day-to-day political influences present in outside communities. Third, traditionalists see community-based research as limited in scope. It is seen as weaker in its ability to explain and its ability to have an impact when compared with national research. Finally, the legal system that rules over the university—the tenure and promotion system—discourages new ways of approaching social programs and research and helps to preserve this status quo.

The Discipline Defines Research Priorities

Much of the research completed by university-based research is aimed at furthering the knowledge base of the researcher's discipline. While there are often social policy implications of such research, the primary goal is not social change per se. The intent of the more “pure” academic-based research projects is adding to the “knowledge in the field” and publishing in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. In contrast, CBPR has as its end not merely increasing the body of knowledge available to us, but also the goal of involving community members in the research process, improving a community's own capacity to engage in research, and facilitating social change.

Research ideas in traditional research are not generated through a participatory process involving members of a constituency, e.g., poor people, victims of crime, mothers seeking quality child care for their preschoolers, or people who are HIV-positive. Rather, research ideas are generated within the discipline. This happens when journal editors make decisions about what gets published in journals, particularly the “top” journals in any field. It happens when colleagues talk to each other in departmental gatherings or at national conventions in their field. It also happens when faculty advise their graduate students as to what research topics to pick for doctoral dissertations or master's theses. The idea of having people outside the circle of universities, research institutes, or professional associations involved in setting the research agenda is an alien concept in traditional research.

Some academics do write reports for consumption by nonprofessional audiences ranging from government agencies to corporations to nonprofit organizations and regional advocacy organizations. However, even in these cases, the research generally is not participatory. It does not try to increase community capacity, and does not always see social change as its goal.

Community-based Research Is Seen as “Political” and Biased

Allowing community partners, especially representatives of the population to be studied, into the research process is viewed by traditionalists as politicizing the research process and biasing the research outcomes. Critics say that the objectivity of academic inquiry is being compromised. However, all research is political both in terms of how we select the research focus and how we structure the research process. The mere choice of what to research is a political decision. For example, a decision to research how to support more affordable housing in a middle-income community versus how to attract more developers to build more middle-income housing in that same community is a political decision. A decision by one social scientist to research what computer games college students play versus the choice of another social scientist to research the lack of access that children in low-income communities have to computers represent political decisions. Involvement of community partners in selecting research issues and conceptualizing research design does not mean that research outcomes will be biased. As long as rigorous methodologies are used in pursuing research questions, outcomes will be credible and valuable to both the community and the discipline.

Community-based Research Is Seen as Parochial

Traditionalists see community-based research as less powerful because it is limited in scope, both in terms of potential geographical level at which it can be applied and in terms of its generalizability to theory. Research taking place within a community—whether it is comparing different institutions within the community or using qualitative methods to describe a social problem in more detail—is not as valued as national research in many academic circles. This traditional culture of research also worships the theoretical and devalues the practical. Indeed, at the wine and hor d’oeuvre reception at the annual professional meeting, to have your research referred to as “applied” or “local” is as likely meant to be a subtle put down as it is meant to be a compliment. “Community-based” and “grassroots” labels are viewed as generic, something that will not sell well in the national and international academic markets of important ideas.

Tenure and Promotion Guidelines as an Obstacle

The most visible way in which this traditional culture of academia emerges is in personnel decisions. During the hiring process and later, at the tenure and promotion decision points, the discipline-oriented perspective within academia is most apparent. Sometimes this culture can be indifferent to community involvement; other times it is