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Using Community Based Participatory Action Research as Service-learning for Tribal College Students

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Introduction

The research literature advocating community-based participatory research (CBPR) as the culturally competent approach to conducting research among cultural groups is abundant (see Fals Borda, Friere, and Lewin for origins and for praxis see Israel, Schultz, Parker & Becker, 2001; Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Lasker, Weiss & Miller, 2001a, 2001b) CBPR merits include: recognition of tribal sovereignty, working with community members as local experts, ensuring research is beneficial to the community, enhanced community research capacity, and community input regarding analysis and results interpretation. Results dissemination should be in the form of reports and presentations. The goal is to provide documentation for Tribal communities of identified needs for the purposes of intervention, planning, or funding application. This essay extends the discussion of CBPR by advocating that researchers invite tribal college students into the research process as a form of service learning. Service learning is defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (ETR Associates, 2012, para 1).

This work reports the methodological approach used in a CBPR project that incorporated Northern Plains tribal college students from four different communities as data gatherers and co-researchers in the research process. Additionally, we report preliminary findings of perceptions of service learning among the participating tribal college students based on reflective interviews.

Methodology

This project resulted from collaborations between a four-year university and four two-year tribal colleges to conduct research in a respectful and meaningful way. The project sought to understand American Indian preferences for risk and crisis communication channels (such as radio, Internet and television) and trusted spokespersons during events of food contamination using talking circle methodology. Talking circles represent a traditional approach to Native discussions where everyone’s voice is respected; thus making this approach more culturally competent than the standard focus group formats (for more information about talking circle methodology see Hodge, Fredricks, & Rodriguez, 1996 and Hodge, Pasqua, Martinez, & Geishirt-Cantrell, 2002). The research team included Native and non-Native researchers. One community member in each area was hired to assist project facilitation in their respective community. Additionally, research team members worked with faculty members at each community college to identify co-researcher tribal college students.

Tribal college students were trained and earned certification in Institution Review Board protocols, and were provided an in-depth information about focus group and talking circle methodology including note taking and critical listening. The trained tribal college students were then hired to take notes at three talking circle focus groups. Facilitators debriefed the students directly following the talking circle focus groups and follow-up interviews were conducted within six months to inquire about the service learning aspect of the project.

Participants

Of the 16 students who were trained, 13 completed the fieldwork. All of the 13 students were contacted via email and telephone. Six students chose to complete the evaluation; each of the four Native American communities was represented by at least one student.

Data Collection

In-depth telephone interviews, or deep listening sessions, with students from the four Northern Plains tribal colleges were used to evaluate the perceived service learning of the students. While face-to-face interviews were preferred, travel to each of the four areas, some very remote, was fiscally prohibitive. Students were asked 10 questions based on the theoretical foundation of service learning. Students who participated in the evaluation received a \$20 Wal-Mart card in appreciation of their time.

Procedures

Interview appointments were made via email with the participating students. Interviews lasted 30 to 40 minutes. In lieu of audio recording responses, a practice that can hinder full disclosure among disparate populations, the interviewer took detailed notes and asked for responses to be repeated to capture direct quotations; thus, increasing the reliability of the data collection.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were coded for themes by two independent coders, one Native and one non-Native. A third investigator addressed the two sets of themes and addressed any discrepancies in coding to maintain validity in the findings. The research team included scholars very familiar with qualitative inquiry and including members of the cultural group helped to ensure accurate culturally relevant interpretations.

Preliminary Findings

“This research stuff helps them in the community. They get an idea that there are people that are concerned. They want people to know what they think what they believe in...what their thoughts are. Even the data that you collect help us know what we need here.”

- Northern Plains Tribal College Student

This essay extends the discussion of CBPR by advocating that researchers invite tribal college students into the research process as a form of service-learning. Preliminary findings suggest that a CBPR approach framed as service-learning bolsters a sense of community, a sense of personal pride, and a deeper understanding of research methodology among participating tribal college students. Engaging and empowering tribal college students through experiential service learning opportunities such as conducting research in their own communities provides additional benefits to Native American communities. Using

the youth of the community to gather the voice of the community is empowering and can effectively empower the community itself.

This approach can potentially decrease the apprehension among Native American communities to collaborate with outside researchers and provides added value built inherent in the research process. Additionally, using CBPR as service learning with tribal college students provides an opportunity to experience research in practice; thus assisting student learning, while also empowering the student in understanding community issues and voice. The findings from this study suggest that tribal college students are interested in serving the community. By forming participatory collaborations with tribal colleges, tribal college students, and external researchers, youth can experience the research process and be empowered to better understand community needs and perhaps even inspired to use research methods to help solve community issues.

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