

## 16. Community-Based Action Research

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*“Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry beings pursue with the world and with others.*

*“The methodology proposed requires that the investigators and the people (who would normally be considered objects of that investigation) should act as co-investigators. The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration.... the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and take possession of that reality.*

*“The investigation requires the people’s thinking—thinking which occurs only in and among people together seeking out reality. I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for me. Even if the people’s thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change. Producing and acting upon their own ideas—not consuming those of others—must constitute that process.”*

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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Since thoughtful analysis is a prerequisite for taking effective action, virtually every course offered by CLP sites provides students with some experience with community-based research as well as organizing principles. All the Community Change Studies courses help students deepen their research and analytical skills, including courses in Culture, Class and Identity, Community Organizing, the Regional Political Economy, and upper division courses on specific sets of social and political issues. A research mindset and skills are also fundamental to being able to learn fully from being immersed in field experience, reading and classroom discussion.

In addition, several CLP programs offer full courses on Community-Based Action Research. Complementing courses on Community Organizing, they stress the importance of developing the knowledge and skills of **volunteer leaders** of social movements and organizations as a critical strategy for creating community capacity and social change.

Introduced and popularized by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, and by the Highlander Center, "**education for social change**" is an approach to adult education based on the conviction that poor people themselves must develop their base of knowledge so they can work out the solutions to their own problems. It brings people together to critically examine their past experiences and present situations, to analyze their needs and priorities, and to work collectively to solve community problems through a deeply democratic process. Popular educators are often wary of traditional "organizers" whom they worry may wield too much influence and undercut development of the community's own knowledge, skills and power.

Courses on Community-Based Research (CBR) therefore provide students with direct experience in research. Participatory Action Research, or PAR, is a type of community-based research which stresses creating participatory processes which involve community members themselves in conducting research. This transfer of skills and power includes creating opportunities for the community to be involved in all aspects of research -- interviewing people, jointly studying policy issues, analyzing the institutions and interests behind them, and deciding on alternative policies and broad-based strategies for bringing about change. PAR courses stress the transfer of these listening, relationship-building and participatory action research skills to people in the community so they are empowered to move ahead on issues without being dependent on professional popular educators.

### **Teaching Community-Based Research in New York City:**

The CLP Network's affiliate in New York City -- the City College of New York, or CCNY -- describes its course in Community Based Research as follows:

*This class will be an introduction to the methods and theory of community-based research. It will cover how and why research in partnership with community-based organizing differs from more standard approaches to social science research. It*

*will cover several approaches to community-based and participatory-action research, helping students to understand their differences, similarities, and stakes. The course will be taught in conjunction with actual community organizing efforts and give students practice in designing, co-designing, and carrying out community-based research projects with direct policy relevance.*

*In this seminar, students will:*

- *Develop an understanding of how social science research can support and strengthen community organizing by reviewing examples of historically significant community-based research projects.*
- *Learn how to craft and navigate community-based research by planning and conducting a project in conjunction with a local community-organizing campaign.*
- *Gain experience and build skills in collaborating with fellow students and community partners to create and use research products, including research reports, policy proposals, and popular education materials.*

Prof. John Krinsky, the Program Director for the CLP Certificate program at CCNY, furnished a great example of faculty and students using community-based action research strategies and skills to work with community groups and win substantial victories:



*“A class I held in 2011 that blended regular undergraduates and members and staff of the homeless activist group, Picture the Homeless. In it, we studied different kinds of social housing and the history of housing struggles in NYC. A follow-up research project--with two undergraduate research assistants and two research assistants from PTH--resulted in a mapping of neighborhoods in which homelessness was rampant, but that were also facing gentrification threats and had a significant amount of vacant property. These neighborhoods were ripe, we thought, for CLTs to preserve affordable housing and stabilize rents so that people wouldn't be pushed out.*

*“We were about to issue a report when we saw a report with much of the same data from the Community Board in East Harlem, which called for a CLT. So we joined forces, and also found that a studio in Columbia's planning program was partnering with a group that is now called the New Economy Project, to plan for CLTs to preserve foreclosed housing. We all got together, and invited others in, and formed the New York City Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI), which has helped start a much broader movement around CLTs in NYC.”*

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### **Participatory Action Research and organizing -- “Roofless Women”:**

Another classic example of participatory action research which includes dramatic examples of success in transferring skills and knowledge to community members by involving them directly in the research, analysis, and action comes from Professor Marie Kennedy of UCLA.

Two decades ago, as a faculty-member at UMass Boston, Professor Kennedy began working with six homeless women on the issues they were most concerned about, documenting how they were treated by shelters and other service providers. The poor women themselves became informal principal investigators, completing 150 interviews with other homeless women about their experience with service providers, learning research and community organizing skills on the job.

To guide and support the project, Dr. Kennedy created a steering committee of formerly homeless women and representatives of groups concerned with homelessness, poverty, and domestic violence who committed themselves to collaborating in seeking policy changes and to consulting directly with homeless women in their decision-making processes.

The evaluation elicited the women's insights into how their homelessness could have been prevented, what their situations were before they became homeless, and whether they knew their housing rights. They then publicized their survey findings, went to policymakers and led successful campaigns to influence state policies and programs. The professor then helped the six women enroll in the College for Public and Community Service at UMass Boston and pursue bachelors' degrees in community planning and advocacy with free tuition, a stipend and reimbursement for childcare and transportation. They were given course credit for their experiential learning conducting the research.

In empowerment terms, the development of the six women investigators was called "phenomenal." All did well in school, all found new jobs, all joined boards of nonprofits, and all became confident public speakers and advocates for changes in public policy to benefit the homeless. Together they built a powerful organization of "Roofless Women", demonstrating that though they had no roofs they had made homes for themselves and were not "homeless". The University of Massachusetts built from this success to create a special program called Women in Community Development to educate and support low-income women in community development work.

### **A Possible Project on the Campus -- Community-Based Action Research on the College's Work Study Program:**

CLP is working for reforms to expand and strengthen the Federal Work Study program so it's of maximum value to students and communities. In this campaign it would be extremely useful to have more information about how the program is working on the ground, especially at colleges which are in the CLP Network.

That would be an excellent focal point for college community-based action research as it is directly relevant to students. How does their college administer the Federal Work Study program and how might it be made more beneficial? The research could include: review of key documents from the college, analysis of federal legislation and regulations, interviews of administrators and students; and preparation of a report of findings, conclusions and recommendations.

In planning such research, it would be important to anticipate that it may raise issues make some college administrators uncomfortable, and to plan accordingly. *See Appendix D for details on conducting research on this issue.*

### **Examples of Community-based action research linked with national policy work and advocacy:**

In this era of struggle over the future of government social programs and cynicism about the overwhelming power and lack of accountability of major public and private institutions, grassroots community groups, community-oriented academics and others have developed important new techniques for helping ordinary citizens thoroughly understand the policies which have such a huge impact upon their lives and their communities. These provide the basis for informed action.

Over the years, organizations have launched a number of these participatory action or "citizen monitoring" projects. Some have been elaborate and sophisticated, producing definitive analyses of the impact of federal programs, bank lending practices, or other key policies.

Others -- especially those launched in lean years when there is little funding for multisite monitoring and civic education -- have followed a simpler, yet very effective "testing" approach. They arrange for people who are eligible for Medicaid or job training, for example, to apply for that assistance and document how they are treated. Such testing has a powerful impact -- it produces facts,

educates people who are going through the process of “testing” and research, and can provide the base for marshalling strong pressure for reform. In Idaho, for example, testing led to 18 changes in public policies for the Medicaid program.

One of the first major multi-site citizen monitoring efforts concentrated on the Community Development Block Grant program. CDBG was then a new program, disbursing nearly \$4 billion a year to local and state governments and giving them great flexibility in deciding what mix of housing, economic and community development and services programs should be funded. However, they were obligated to ensure that the funds “primarily benefit” lower income people and that basic civil rights, citizen participation and other standards were met. A national citizen monitoring effort created by the Center for Community Change eventually funded community groups and coalitions in 80 jurisdictions and trained them to involve residents in a thorough analysis of how CDBG was being implemented locally and nationally. Annual reports documented performance in each community, pointing out when federal requirements were being violated, local needs neglected or promises broken, or other implementation problems arose.

**Initially hostile, federal officials including HUD Assistant Secretary Embry – now President of the Abell Foundation -- eventually characterized this evaluation as highly credible and helpful to their efforts to monitor performance and enforce standards.** They found many occasions when they received far more reliable information through these citizen channels than they obtained directly from local officials or federal field offices.

This participatory research process also provided a firm foundation for informed action which had a massive and often long-lasting impact on federal as well as local policies. It led to tightening of federal standards on income targeting, citizen participation, civil rights and other key safeguards. At least equally importantly, **the intensive civic education gave community leaders a thorough understanding of local and federal policy issues and decision-making which prepared many of them for important leadership positions.** Many of them joined the national coalition’s Board and became its leaders, an important and well-planned expansion of community control at the national level.

The CDBG project had sufficient resources to go one important step farther. The **initiative helped local monitors become national leaders on the issues they knew best**. It did this by convening local monitors 2-3 times a year to review drafts of the national report and participate in developing the conclusions. This gave local communities an opportunity to shape the national policy recommendations and strategy for pursuing them, thus ensuring that the advocacy agenda reflected their findings, priorities and political strengths. **This highly unusual level of accountability and responsiveness gave local groups an exceptionally strong sense of ‘ownership’ of the national policy agenda, ensuring their enthusiastic involvement in advocating for that agenda and assuming increasing leadership at the national level.**

Thus citizen monitoring prepared local and state people to become national spokespeople on issues which, as a result of their research, they understood superbly well. Local monitors became highly influential with policy-makers because their evaluation work had given them a powerful combination of intimate knowledge of local situations and sophisticated understanding of the "macro" picture.

In addition, two local monitors became members of Congress, while others moved onto city councils or other leadership positions in government, foundations and the nonprofit sector. A high level Urban Institute researcher reported that she found the CDBG monitoring experience still influencing San Francisco's city budgeting process more than 25 years later because of its success in developing a cadre of informed citizens which grew and continues to help shape budget decisions in that city.

A subsequent "learning initiative" by a team led by MacArthur awardee John Gaventa of the University of Tennessee's Community Partnership Center helped people in 10 rural communities come together to monitor implementation of the federal Empowerment Zone legislation. Within a year, ordinary citizens in these towns had a highly sophisticated understanding of the program and how it was being implemented locally. Their local surveys and the national report aggregating their findings provided important insights into program implementation. They influenced local policies and provided the factual basis for a three-hour briefing for top federal officials on how the program was playing out in these very different communities.



Unfortunately, the US Department of Agriculture, which had funded the Learning Initiative, decided not to release the final reports, apparently because they showed weaknesses in how the EZ program was being implemented by local officials. The CDBG project was far luckier despite being funded by a federal agency: It was funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity, not the agency in charge of implementing the CD program. **Title 9 of the OEO legislation specifically funded the antipoverty agency so it could finance projects evaluating the impact of federal program on poor people – an invaluable tool for government accountability and reform as well as civic engagement.**

In recent years funding has been scarce for community-based evaluation and research into policy issues. Nevertheless, many community organizing groups incorporate these approaches into their work, stressing participatory research as an effective tool for developing leaders as well as issues.

As our nation looks for new ways to make government more responsive and effective and to encourage the private sector and major nonprofits to be more accountable and helpful, **community-based monitoring offers an important strategy. It can revitalize civic engagement by giving people practical new tools for mastering highly complex issues and shaping policies to address their concerns** – an extraordinarily important and hopeful contribution in an era of cynicism about government and other major institutions and declining civic engagement. Citizen monitoring thus deserves serious attention and support by those who are most concerned about the need for new strategies for rejuvenating our democracy and renewing our social contract.

Rooted in their communities, determined to see conditions improve, intimately familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of current and past programs, organizations of low-income people represent a major source of energy for and commitment to real reform which leads to more accountable, better designed programs. However, to play that role with maximum effectiveness, grassroots groups will need help expanding their capacity to monitor and evaluate current and possible alternative policies.

*“Your vote is your voice.... When we got Mexican-American candidates saying ‘Vote for me and I’ll pave the streets, that’s when the revolution started.”*

— Willie Velasquez,  
Founder of Southwest Voter Registration Education Project

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### **Applying Community-Based Research to Analyze a Community:**

The following course outline illustrates how community-based action research approaches can be used to develop people’s understanding of the community in which they live and/or work

#### **Learning goals:**

Upon completion of this course the student will –

- Deepen his/her understanding of the people, history, culture, issues and social and organizational fabric of the community they live and/or work in.
- Be able to demonstrate that he/she has developed the initial research and analytic skills which they need to develop such an understanding.
- Be able to demonstrate an initial understanding of how the community is affected by the broader society, social, cultural, economic and political systems; and how Race, Class, Gender, Belief Systems, Bias, Power, Privilege and Opportunity affect communities,
- Have become generally familiar with how social movements, community organizing and other change strategies shape a community and can shape its future,
- Have deepened his/her understanding of his/her own identity in the context of this study of the community and its context.
- Each student will make demonstrable progress in developing the following additional skills for community change work:

## Preparing to Win

- Growing interpersonal skills for building relationships that enable him/her to work at the community level and encourage people to think more deeply about their community and participate more actively on issues which concern them.
- Skills in participatory research and popular education which help develop people's capacity to participate and develop as informed change agents, organizers, and leaders in their communities,
- Skills/tools for critical thinking, strategic planning, and reflective practice.
- For information on possible topics to explore, see Appendix D.

## STUDENT STORIES

### **Nina Tinikashvili, On Research, Participation and Cultural Competency**

*Unlike many students who enroll in coursework associated with Community Learning Partnership programs, Nina Tinikashvili already had quite a bit of experience as a community organizer while a college student at CUNY's City College in New York.*

*"I worked with a local Council Member, Helen Rosenthal, on an organizing project to help her office launch participatory budgeting," she said, referring to a process by which local residents are given power to decide*



*how to allocate a given amount of financial resources. "I'd never heard of community organizing, but I've always been interested in policy," she said. "And this was such an amazing project particularly for me." Nina, she explained, is a green card holder from Georgia ("The country not the state," she clarified, laughing) and so can't vote in elections in the United States.*

***"It frustrated me, as someone interested in policy, that I couldn't vote."***

*Participatory budgeting, however, introduced Nina to a way to become politically engaged, even though she is unable to vote. "It frustrated me, as someone interested in policy, that I couldn't vote," Nina said. "But participatory budgeting is great because you don't need to be a citizen to vote. You'd don't need to live in the district if you work or go to school there. You don't even have to be 18."*

*She also appreciated how straightforward **participatory budgeting** is on the issues it can help to solve. "Politicians often talk about all these*

*complicated laws, but participatory budgeting worked on issues everyone can understand,” she said. “The school or park needs new swings, or the school needs a new tech program. To be able to have a say in local decisions like these and in how real tax dollars are spent is just genius.”*

***“To be able to have a say in local decisions and in how real tax dollars are spent is just genius.”***

*After concluding her internship with the Council Member, Nina decided she wanted to learn more. “My internship really solidified my interest in working in public service,” Nina said. So when one of her advisers told her about the Community Learning Partnership courses on offer at City College, she jumped at the opportunity.*

*In the fall semester, she enrolled in “Intro to Community Organizing,” taught by Kevin Ryan, who was a Program Director for New York Foundation at the time and is now a Senior Program Officer at the Ford Foundation. “I wanted to learn skills to help me organize, and that would help me in a public service career path,” she said. “His course taught us about all different types of organizing.” She was particularly impressed by faith-based organizing. “I had underestimated the power of religious groups, and their ability to make change. It made me a better-rounded student.”*

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*In the spring semester, she took Participatory Action Research with Hillary Caldwell, a Professor at CUNY City College. “I really enjoyed the fall semester course and wanted to learn how to do this kind of research,” Nina said. “I was a sociology major, so this fit in really well my interests. It’s basically learning to do people-focused research.”*

*As part of the course, students take on a group field project. Nina chose to work with Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), a tenant rights group in the Southwest Bronx. “The director of CASA had been noticing more immigrants of African descent moving to the area, and*

wanted us to see how we could help involve them to their housing organizing efforts,” she said, noting the majority of CASA’s current membership is Spanish-speaking. Nina and her group set about identifying institutions that new immigrants were already active in, such as churches and sports clubs. “We found that the best way to engage people was to partner with organizations where people are already a part of.”

Nina graduated and has since taken a job with the New York City Health Department in the intergovernmental department. Though she isn’t working directly as a community organizer, she says she finds ample opportunity to apply what she learned in CLP-affiliated coursework in her new profession. “This job is more policy-based,” she notes, “but I speak with constituents every day about their problems and about what kind of help they



need. The organizing courses taught me how important it is to understand people’s backstory. If someone asks for help, you don’t know what’s going on behind that. It’s important to assist people in a culturally competent way that’s also effective.”

As for the future? Nina has a couple of ideas. “Ever since working with the Council Member I’d like to one day run for office in New York City,” she said. After her work with different immigrant communities, she says she’d also love to create a community-based organization for people of Eastern European descent. “There’s not all that many immigrants from Georgia, Russia, and Armenia,” she said, “But there’s been a big influx in the last decade, and they need help, too.”

Profile by David Dodge

## STUDENT STORIES

### CCNY Students Help Save Non-Profits From Improper Tax Collection

*Over the course of a semester, three students enrolled in the CLP-affiliated course Community-Based Research at City College of New York (CCNY) helped save dozens of non-profits and religious groups from improper tax collection.*



*The students—Edward Garcia, Lindsey Johnson, and Felix Kuadugah—partnered with the community-based organization 596 acres to investigate the impact of tax collectors on non-profit organizations as part of the fieldwork component of their class.*

*Though non-profit organization are supposed to be exempt from property taxes and water and sewer fees, the Department of Finance requires organizations to recertify every year—a requirement that only came about in 2012. Many non-profit organizations, unaware of this change, find themselves with liens against their properties.*

*As the students point out in an op-ed published in the New York Daily News, the Department of Finance has done a poor job educating non-profit and religious organization about the policy change, putting them at unfair risk. Groups are notified by mail, but the correspondence often doesn't reach it's indented recipients thanks to a change in address or leadership. "Unsurprisingly," the students write, "these groups are located disproportionately in majority black and Latino communities."*

*Over the course of a semester, the City College students worked with 596 acres to help remove 108 non-profits from this summer's lien list. 235 nonprofits, synagogues, churches and mosques remain on the list, however, all for taxes that should not have been charged in the first place.*

*The students reflected on their experience in the research class, writing in part:*

*“Community-based research is mostly a class about methods, but we learn something in the process about how government works, or doesn't. What does the sale of nonprofit tax liens tell us?”*