

Jigsaw Research Communities: Coordinating Research and Service Across Multiple Courses to Serve a Single Community Partner

Anne Cross

Metropolitan State University, Twin Cities

Deborah Eckberg

Metropolitan State University, Twin Cities

This article describes a public scholarship project in which two faculty members worked together to integrate service-learning and research into multiple courses to benefit a single community partner. The project linked undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty in a broad-based research endeavor that contributed to the survival and growth of a nonprofit court monitoring organization and ultimately improved the delivery of justice. The authors provide an overview of the project, treating it as a case study in the development of multi-course mass research projects, drawing inspiration from the jigsaw classroom method. The approach developed uses elements from a number of high-impact educational practices. Guided by faculty expertise and directed by active coordination, students engaged in research and service tasks that had been divided into manageable pieces and distributed across multiple courses to complete an original, collaborative, and groundbreaking piece of public scholarship for the community partner. Simultaneously, students pursued varied learning outcomes related to the project in courses involving criminal justice practice, nonprofit management, diversity awareness, and community involvement.

Keywords: jigsaw research, court monitoring, criminal justice, nonprofit, community, undergraduate research experiences

Introduction

This article introduces a public scholarship project undertaken at Metropolitan State University in which multiple faculty members collaborated to incorporate research and service-learning across multiple courses to produce original research findings for a single community partner. The approach draws elements from several well-established high-impact educational practices, including common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative projects, undergraduate research, diversity learning, service-learning, community-based learning and the jigsaw classroom model. (For overviews and descriptions of these approaches, see Kuh, 2008 and Aronson, 2011.)

In the context of a semester-long project begun in 2013, faculty members designed a set of coordinated community engagement and research assignments across courses they taught in their home department, Criminal Justice, to simultaneously produce meaningful learning experiences for students and a piece of applied public scholarship. Analysis of the case study provides insights into how faculty and students

can collaborate across courses to (a) support student learning in off-campus settings, (b) enhance the value of student-engaged public scholarship, (c) increase the likelihood that public scholarship is available to and implemented by practitioners, and (d) deepen engagement among faculty and students with each other and with community problems and agencies.

The article provides an overview of the project, treating it as a case study in the development of a jigsaw research community. It includes an overview of the distribution of project tasks across the campus community and information about how those tasks were integrated into coursework across the criminal justice curriculum at Metropolitan State University. Finally, the article describes the responses from community partners regarding research findings produced by the project.

Project Goals

One of our longstanding community partners is a court monitoring organization that puts citizen volunteers in the court to evaluate the justice system and increase public engagement with the courts. Project participants inside and outside the university shared the goal of improving the delivery of justice in the Twin Cities area and boosting public engagement in district courts. The immediate goal of the project was to produce independent, user-friendly research about the effectiveness of community court monitoring efforts for the community partner so that they could better understand and articulate the value of their work. A secondary goal was to build and strengthen ties both inside and outside the university, including connections already at work in the community, connections between the community and the university, and connections between students, faculty, and courses at the university.

The project's major innovation over previous approaches is that it engaged faculty, undergraduate students, and graduate students across multiple (rather than single) courses in a common research project. This approach builds on examples of successful course-wide efforts described in the literature wherein faculty coordinate the work of students in a single course to produce public scholarship. When carefully guided by faculty, these have proven successful in producing findings of value and in building meaningful ties between universities and their community partners. Examples of successful course-wide projects include: carefully planned faculty-mediated student immersion experiences in prisons which has produced informed public policy recommendations that have benefited prisons, prisoners, the public, and the course's immediate community partners (Pompa, 2002; Pompa & Crabbe, 2004); faculty-guided student work in community gardens which have produced new knowledge useful to community garden organizations about the impacts of gardening on participants' identities (Hoffman & Doody, 2015); evaluation research coordinated by students in the context of a course which has produced a formal evaluation for a children's museum that was tailored to help the museum better meet the needs of the public (Williams & Sparks, 2011); and faculty-directed student research in neighborhoods which has produced documentaries and data reports regarding employment for a community group (Falk, Durlington, & Lakford, 2012). More broadly, the benefits of cooperative learning in university settings are well established (Yi & LuXi, 2012). This project seeks

to expand and broaden the benefits of the single-course integration model of project designs by engaging multiple faculty across multiple courses.

Background

As mentioned, the project's organizational partner is a local and national court monitoring nonprofit. For the purposes of this article we will refer to the organization by the pseudonym Advocates for Court Accountability or ACA. The organization has a 20-year history of coordinating volunteer courtroom observation and public advocacy. Their mission is to increase justice system responsiveness to crimes of violence against women and children, and increase victim safety and offender accountability. ACA does this by sending volunteers to the court to sit in on hearings and take notes regarding judge demeanor, court case outcomes, and a number of other variables related to the administration of justice and victim safety. Each of the faculty members involved in the project had pre-existing long-term professional relationships with the court research and oversight communities in Minneapolis: Deborah Eckberg as a veteran of the Minnesota Court's internal research staff and Anne Cross as a board member of both police and court oversight boards, including ACA. Additionally, these faculty members had ties to ACA through smaller-scale service projects and through the placement of student interns and volunteers.

In collaboration with students and the community partners, the faculty members coordinated all logistics of the project, aligning specific tasks with the needs of specific coursework in graduate and undergraduate courses. Law enforcement and criminal justice undergraduates across multiple courses conducted experimental studies of the immediate impact of monitoring at the courtroom level, measuring (among other things) changes in specific components of the courtroom climate when participating as official or passive observers. Drawing on this research and conducting additional research of their own, graduate students in the Metropolitan State University Master of Science in Criminal Justice Program produced an evaluation of the court monitoring organization focusing (at the request of the community partner) on measuring and assessing the organization's successes and shortcomings in fulfilling its objectives and stated mission.

The university community that worked on the project described here comprised undergraduate and graduate criminal justice students, undergraduate law enforcement students, and two criminal justice faculty members. The constructed research community worked in a coordinated effort (involving every student in each partnered course) to explore citizen efforts at court oversight. The project offered several advantages over traditional strategies of incorporating community engagement and service-learning into courses. By acting as members of a coordinated, faculty-directed community connected with the local court monitoring community, project participants were able to produce significant collective research outputs that were of value to community partners as well as to faculty, students, and the community at large.

History and Motivations

Through preexisting collaborations with the court monitoring and court research community, we learned in 2013 that the community partner was struggling with diminished support from donors and difficulties securing resources from grants and foundations (ACA, 2013), as were other justice-related nonprofits nationwide, several of which had folded in that calendar year (Kimball, 2013) or had become dependent on a small handful of financial supporters (e.g., Court Watch NOLA, 2013). Beginning around 2012, community partners noted an increasing suspicion of court monitoring groups nationwide, and they felt that court monitoring had entered a period of transition and outright peril, with financial support decreasing dramatically. In discussions with ACA's board of directors and staff, it seemed evident that most of the remaining optimism in the organization was grounded in the belief that better understanding and more complete, data-driven reports regarding the effects of court monitoring would lead to more donations from current and future supporters. Community partners reported that potential supporters were frequently requesting precise data regarding program impact, and that ACA was unprepared to fulfill such requests. Furthermore, as a smaller and still shrinking organization, ACA was not equipped with the expertise to effectively measure or report on its work. In short, ACA found that it had very little data about its own work, and despite a 20-year history of collecting data in the courtroom, the organization had very little sense of the concrete value produced by its volunteer researchers or how to document it. While staff researchers at ACA had produced externally funded and well-received short-term research projects (on issues including court security, sentencing, and child protection), ACA board members and staff noted that the day-to-day, paper-and-pencil work routine of volunteers had taken on a clock-punching feel, with staff and board reporting resistance to change simply because the organization had always done things a certain way.

Because several major court monitoring groups had plans underway to build and test a purposeful program theory at the onset of the project described here, an external evaluation marked by independence and objectivity was timely and promised to have a significant impact through implementation. Faculty met with the ACA board chair to discuss the direction and purpose of the collaboration. Soon after, faculty received ACA's permission to study and evaluate the organization, its environment, and its challenges. The project was approved by the university's institutional research board to ensure the protection of human subjects.

General Directions

Court monitoring groups participate organically and collaboratively with the court systems, and court monitoring is concerned largely with the systemic view rather than individual outcomes. These attributes make the contributions of court monitoring groups inherently difficult to measure quantitatively or qualitatively. The project described here sought to develop introductory benchmarks and guidelines for ACA to use for systematically measuring the variables that court monitoring organizations may influence, including courtroom climate, responsiveness to women and children,

and public and civic engagement with the courts. The project was particularly valuable because there is virtually no published literature on court monitoring. The evaluation also sought to create parameters for ongoing program evaluations at ACA and other monitoring groups facing similar challenges in measuring and documenting their work.

As a monitoring group, ACA was interested in modernizing its data collection and analysis procedures. ACA leadership requested evaluation research that would establish effective practices for volunteer data collection in the courtroom, linking their data collection and analysis to the organizational goals of facilitating court responsiveness to violence, bringing a public eye to justice, and more accurately measuring the effectiveness of current monitoring practices.

Additionally, the focused evaluation of court monitoring was designed to strengthen the capacity of monitoring groups beyond ACA by establishing effective practices for electronically analyzing and disseminating the backlog of empirical data currently in paper form at court monitoring agencies. ACA believed that better data practices would help court monitoring groups to more precisely articulate and formalize partnerships and better communicate the intent and outcomes of these programs to outsiders. ACA also desired help developing improved data dissemination practices to foster public engagement and create more focused dialogue with justice systems, more informed engagement with issues, and more data-driven advocacy practices.

Court Monitoring as a Movement

Founders and leaders in the court monitoring movement have sought to make the court more responsive to the needs of women and children by elevating public visibility of the justice system. This practice takes many forms but finds its foundation in the observation and data collection activities performed by volunteers in selected courtroom settings. These data serve as the basis of reporting and advocacy activities implemented by the ACA organization's staff in an effort to improve the overall culture of the courts by raising awareness. Staff members also pursue corrective interventions by calling into question specific instances of language and behavior that they believe affects the application of justice. For example, victim-disparaging language used by judges might result in a phone call to the judge's chambers from ACA representatives. Instances of downward departures from sentencing guidelines may be reported in monitoring newsletters. Hostile body language on the part of court personnel might be the subject of a special report.

Connection Between Proposed Research and the Problem

While ACA's mix of advocacy activities seemed reasonable, its strategies had never been systematically tested or verified. This project sought to develop more reliable performance measures that would make it easier to evaluate the reliability of data produced by citizen court monitoring groups. ACA was enthusiastic about this prospect.

The Project: Graduate Students

Participation in this project was a requirement for the graduate students in this service-learning course. The ACA project achieved multiple purposes because the class was designed to educate the students about research methods and the process of program evaluation. Additionally, the project helped the graduate students engage with the community on multiple levels and in an entirely different way than that to which they had become accustomed and acclimated. In fact, the project redefined community engagement for these particular students, who developed an appreciation for service opportunities beyond the conventional model of volunteers being connected somewhat blindly and temporarily to clients of soup kitchens, after-school programs and similar organizations for short-term encounters.

Students in this Master of Science in Criminal Justice Program enter the program with at least two years of professional experience and are typically employed full time in the justice system while they make progress on their graduate degrees. The program is designed to help currently employed criminal justice professionals develop skill sets that will propel them to achieve higher levels in their career. One might argue that these students are already naturally and necessarily engaged with the community based on their professions alone, because the community is an integral part of their jobs as police officers, probation officers, victim advocates, and court personnel. However, this collaborative project required the graduate students to engage with expanded levels of community by working indirectly with undergraduate students, by collaborating with faculty and each other as a “think tank” in class, and by striving to assist a struggling nonprofit organization to develop long-term survival strategies that would benefit the organization itself as well as the community of victims and concerned citizens that ACA exists to serve.

For graduate student participants, the project was meant to solidify concepts related to both graduate research methods and program evaluation. Graduate students who were involved in this project learned to apply graduate research methods course content to the creation of concrete research questions and hypotheses. They mastered the design of a large-scale study as well as its individual components. They learned how to carefully construct pre- and post-test measures, how to clean and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data, and how to present analytic results to a lay audience. For some, applying rigorous research methods to a somewhat amorphous real world scenario was reported to have been the most difficult yet most enlightening aspect of the project.

The graduate students were also challenged to implement learning objectives related to utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2011) by conducting a situation analysis of ACA’s current state of affairs, interviewing current and past board and staff members, reviewing literature about best practices for citizen oversight organizations, and contacting similar organizations nationwide to determine their current methods of operation and strategies for success. Ultimately, the students were tasked with assimilating concepts from both program evaluation methods and previous classes in organizational management as they developed overarching recommendations to help ACA survive into the future.

Analysis of Adherence to Mission Statement

A number of activities stemmed from project-related tasks. First, the graduate students dissected ACA's mission statement to see if the activities in which they were engaged mirrored the mission as it was stated and whether or not the mission was being accomplished. ACA's mission statement was "to make the justice system more effective and responsive in handling cases affecting women and children, and to create a more informed and involved public." The class decided that for the purposes of an evaluation project they needed something tangible to work with, and the idea of determining whether the justice system was effective or responsive seemed overwhelmingly daunting for a semester-long project. On the other hand, examining variables and issues related to the involvement of community members in the courts provided a more manageable set of tasks and measurement, and thus the graduate students focused their attention on the latter half of ACA's mission statement.

The graduate students correctly identified that they needed a fresh pool of court monitoring volunteers in order to assess learning via pre- and post-test measures. Out of this need was born the first level of community engagement: engagement of undergraduate court monitor volunteers. We employed a class of undergraduates studying diversity in the criminal justice system and turned court monitoring into a course-required fieldtrip. The court monitors were reasonably diverse in terms of race, gender, and background. Most importantly, they had not engaged in court monitoring before this class, making them excellent test subjects to determine whether or not the experience of court monitoring, even once, would affect their levels of information and incentive for civic engagement.

The graduate students embarked on developing a pre- and post-test designed to measure changes in the court monitors' understanding of the justice system as well as their interest in becoming more active in community activities. In short, the graduate students planned to determine if people who participate in court monitoring become more "informed" and if they indicated an increased propensity to become more "involved," as the ACA mission statement suggested they would.

The undergraduate partners in the study were the pre- and post-test respondents while they were simultaneously serving as courtroom observers and program evaluators. Once the pre- and post-tests were completed, the graduate student group was responsible for analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data. The findings were preliminary, but were deemed interesting and useful to the ACA board of directors and set the stage for additional research efforts.

Analysis of Organization Fundraising Practices

An additional comprehensive project completed by the group of graduate students was an evaluation and audit of ACA's current state of affairs with the development of specific recommendations for changes. At the time, the majority of their problems were understood by ACA participants to be financial. The organization had consistently survived almost exclusively on donations from concerned citizens within a limited and dwindling pool of donors, most of whom were personally linked to ACA board members. As finances rapidly dwindled, ACA's attention began to move almost

exclusively to fundraising approaches, drawing attention away from its interest in clarifying and improving the delivery of its overall mission and focus.

The graduate students gathered information from a number of sources to gain a better understanding of ACA's current and past fundraising efforts as well as information about nonprofit fundraising in general. They began by evaluating ACA's own materials, including a review of their website, newsletters, reports, and budget information. In addition, the graduate students interviewed current and past board members and staff members regarding their interpretation of ACA's current situation and ideas for what should be done to mitigate the financial decline in order for ACA to continue its important work. The next phase was to determine best practices for monitoring organizations by guiding students through both the relatively sparse research literature on citizen oversight in general and court monitoring in particular. Students were provided an overview of other court monitoring groups or similarly situated organizations nationwide, and then had telephone interviews with representatives and staff from these organizations. Students conducted content analysis of websites and contacted organization leaders via phone and e-mail. They analyzed examples of the outreach programs of thriving organizations and compared them to those of ACA.

Undergraduate Participants

Organized groups of undergraduate law enforcement and criminal justice students participated in the project in coordination with the graduate student group and in support of closely related criminal justice coursework. While the work of the undergraduate students directly served the needs of the graduate student course, their work comprised a freestanding community engagement research project in its own right. Undergraduates examined diversity and respect in live courtroom settings through fieldtrips to the courts. Along the way, they carried out a controlled experiment that tested the impact of organized citizen observers on the behavior of court personnel. For example, students in a course on citizenship and community involvement participated in the project by completing shifts and gathering data about the courts as community court monitors. They also served the project by participating in pre- and post-test measurements of their knowledge about courts and their inclinations toward civic engagement and helped with data analysis and engaged with the project's original findings.

A separate group of undergraduate students, drawn from an upper division criminal justice course, focused on diversity issues. With the instructor's guidance, students developed a freestanding but well-integrated research project that examined race and ethnicity in the courtroom through observational data the students collected while serving as volunteer court observers. These students also contributed to the project by participating in pre- and post-test surveys after serving as volunteer courtroom observers.

The participating undergraduate courses integrated student engagement with ACA and the courts into lectures and classroom discussions. During the course focused on citizenship, lectures and discussions featured the role of nonprofits in protecting and enforcing civil rights, using ACA and other watchdog groups as explanatory case

studies. The course that focused on diversity issues examined the role and effectiveness of nonprofits and other institutions that aim to further the cause of equal opportunity and protection under the law, using ACA as a case study. In both courses, undergraduate students raised and discussed concerns about the possibility that, as a group, ACA's stable of volunteer observers (made up mostly of upper-income women) might lack the demographic diversity and adequate community-wide representation necessary for them to collectively weigh in with generalizable assessments about justice. This highly engaging and student-driven avenue of discussion represented one of many unexpected and "unscripted" learning outcomes that organically emerged from engagement with the community. Often, insights from classroom discussions were brought from one course to another to facilitate exchange and cross-fertilization between the participant groups, thus strengthening the research community.

In addition to observing courtrooms and having discussions, ACA undergraduate members of the research community contributed useful background research to the project using secondary sources. Students in the citizenship course contributed research on public engagement, trends in volunteerism, social networks, examination of the tensions between expert and non-expert knowledge, and overviews of the literature on oversight and watchdog groups. Students in the course on diversity issues contributed background research on sentencing disparities in the courts and examined implications for plea bargaining in assessing the value of court monitoring. All undergraduates in the research community evaluated the role of data in assessing the delivery of justice. Although not every individual contribution from the undergraduate group made it into the documentation submitted, each member of the research community was undoubtedly able to see the mark of their contributions and input throughout the final report provided to the community partner.

Findings and Recommendations from Evaluation

The process by which this organizational evaluation occurred mirrored how an agency hired for evaluation consultation might function; individual community members and subgroups were assigned a particular task (e.g., serving as a volunteer court observer, reviewing literature, consulting with other organizations, etc.) and charged with reporting back to the class the next time they met as a group. This transformed at least part of the class period into a "think tank" like atmosphere in which ACA was the "client" and the students were the evaluators and management consultants working to improve the nonprofit's situation. The students were fully engaged with each other, with the faculty, and with ACA, even during times when they were not together in the same context. ACA board members were engaged in multiple discussions and presentations over the course of the semester. At the project's conclusion, the entire board convened on campus to receive the students' findings. Research produced by the project also indirectly engaged the community at large, as the potential perspectives of community members such as victims, perpetrators, and benefactors were an important part of each conversation. Through this holistic process, the research community assembled for this project found that although ACA's purpose was arguably important, the group's hopes for financial sustainability were less than promising; consequently, fundraising should be a top priority.

Students determined that there was a lack of agreement between board members on how this fundraising should be accomplished, which they noted may have been a significant reason for ACA's lack of progress. Perhaps the students' most valuable insight was that part of the reason ACA was not succeeding financially was that its purpose was vague and not clearly communicated via the group's website and other outreach materials. As compared to other community organizations, there seemed to be a lack of clarity about the organization's reason for existing and a related issue involving the lack of clarity about the purpose and use of individual donations. In short, the students astutely determined that the well of donations was running dry, as those who were familiar with ACA's goals had already contributed substantially over the years and new donors were not being recruited, romanced, or even reached. ACA was an unknown entity to much of the community of potential donors.

Leveraging research and data collected from multiple perspectives, the students recommended that ACA clarify its message and purpose by including compelling statements and stories on the group's website and in published materials about why its work is important. The group should also use those statements to demonstrate its effectiveness. This overhaul would include refining the group's mission statement to reflect a clearly communicated message, using ACA's history and personal stories to build support and engagement using new stories to connect with potential donors on an emotional level. These changes would enable ACA to answer not only the question of "what" but also the question of "so what," which is necessary for organizational health, and coincidentally, a primary focus of utilization-focused evaluation. The students also recommended that ACA explore more extensive uses of social media; corporate relationships; and local, state, and federal grant opportunities. Finally, students recommended that ACA branch out to other local court jurisdictions rather than only monitoring the court in the same metropolitan county in which the group has volunteered from the beginning. ACA pursued this recommendation immediately, placing monitors in new courtroom environments shortly after receiving the project's findings.

Benefits to Community Partners

The ACA project enabled the forging of an outcome-oriented partnership with defined goals from the beginning through the end. The project began with meetings involving the faculty authors and the ACA board of directors. Eventually, the board chair spent several hours with the students discussing the state of the organization and its need for a full evaluation. Students engaged with individual ACA board members and staff members via interviews, and faculty regularly communicated with the board chair during the semester. This rather unusual example of a student/community project culminated with a meeting lasting several hours, in which 12 graduate students presented their findings and recommendations to seven board members and then engaged in a lively and energetic discussion designed to help ACA move forward. Students assumed the roles of consultants, and their expertise was acknowledged and respected by the board members, who later expressed their gratitude for all the work that had been done.

After attending the campus forum where they first received the project findings, ACA board members were given an opportunity to provide written feedback and

commentary on the results and their attitudes about the process of collaborating with the university on the evaluation. Board members remarked on the professionalism of the graduate students and the thoroughness of their work. Several board members noted the value of the project outcome, one volunteering that in her estimation, the students' work surpassed that of professional firms who do organizational evaluative analysis for nonprofits for a living. The board member explained:

Over the years we've had some pro bono help from PR firms and ad agencies, and, frankly, their work couldn't hold a candle to the work of your students. I was impressed by how thoroughly they seemed to "get" ACA, and also by their clear and articulate presentations...The presentation of the evaluation...combined hard facts with nuanced discussion of ACA's fate.

Board members referred positively to the fact that the organization and its goals are complex, and that the graduate students were able to dive in and comprehend the group's needs in a very short amount of time:

The students were able to put together a lot of material that included "things we already know," but they changed our focus to "things that really matter." That is invaluable to helping us focus on how to make changes for the future...All of the board members who attended were struck by the finding that we need to create a clear "who" for our outreach efforts so that the public/funders/others can understand how ACA helps people.

They complimented the strategies and approach taken by the students, especially with regard to their collection of background information and consultations with similar organizations. "I was very impressed with the background information they collected... The information about other programs throughout the country and how they compared to ACA was very enlightening." They also noted the importance of the pre- and post-test analysis, based on the undergraduate students' court monitoring research. "The Student Survey Analysis was fascinating and, for the first time, provides us with a way to explain the importance of our daily monitoring in the courts."

Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts

The project's implementation across several courses allowed participants to meet a wide range of specific research and relationship-related goals. In this section we present and discuss the outcomes and impacts of the project, relating our data analysis back to how the project impacted the community partner, our university and the broader community. Particular attention will be paid to specific ways in which the project helped the community partner modernize, overcome obstacles, and seize opportunities.

Information and Analysis

The most tangible outputs of this project were the research and evaluation findings prepared for and presented to the community partner. This information and

analysis reflected several thousand hours of skilled research and data collection. The specific research outputs included 1) reliable data demonstrating a connection between court monitoring and improved courtroom climates; 2) background research on related issues including public engagement and volunteerism; 3) the development of introductory benchmarks and guidelines for ACA to more systematically measure variables that monitoring organizations may influence; 4) the development of guidelines for ongoing program evaluations at ACA; 5) recommendations for improved data collection practices in the courtroom including more defined, and analyzable variables; 6) suggestions for analysis and dissemination of data; 7) preliminary software development for data collection and analysis; and 8) an evidence-based evaluation of the organization, including a set of recommendations for organizational change. Producing these information outputs led to another key output: the provision of meaningful learning experiences for students and faculty.

The research was designed as a collaborative endeavor, and the research findings had significant traction in the agency, leading to several tangible outcomes as ACA implemented several of the recommendations made in the evaluation. ACA pursued the evaluation's recommendation to branch out to neighboring courts by almost immediately placing monitors in new courtroom environments shortly after receiving the project's findings. As recommended, ACA simplified and refined its data collection practices, revamped its fundraising efforts, improved its website, and rolled out an electronic data collection program based on the one developed over the course of the research project.

One of the most visible impacts of the project is its enhancement of ACA's ability to understand and articulate the value of their work. In response to the project's findings, ACA has begun to produce data-driven findings for supporters and funders. It has embarked on a more aggressive program of fundraising and grant writing, using more compelling data and arguments to describe its work and its mission. One of the most dramatic transformations brought by the project has been the transition from manually recorded observations and tabulations to an electronic system of data collection and analysis. These represent significant changes compared with the way the organization functioned prior to this research project.

The presentation of the findings coincided with the entrance of a new executive director at ACA. The organization experienced a successful transition, at least in part due to the information and analysis provided by this project. Research presented to the ACA board of directors arguably contributed to the ability of the board members to support and orient the new executive director, who had comparatively little experience in criminal court or with nonprofit management and was also entering the organization at a time of acute crisis. The board followed the report's recommendation to broaden its reach and demographic composition by increasing the number of board seats and by recruiting, vetting, and voting in a fresh slate of board members. The backgrounds of these new members reflected the report's suggestions to better leverage technology, to reach new types of supporters, and to become a more data-driven and evidence-based organization. Following another recommendation of the report, lay board members were replaced by nonprofit leaders, social media experts and individuals with executive leadership skills. Donations to ACA grew dramatically in the

year following the presentation of the research findings. The annual gala's attendance picked up and the organization attracted new donors and supporters. Marketing materials and a new website are evidence of ACA's continued transition to a more evidence-based, self-reflective organization that is aware of its need for institutional evolution.

One of the key outcomes of the project was the development and use of more reliable performance measures. The evaluation provided a set of tools for ACA to use to measure and promote its work and ACA has begun to use those tools effectively inside the organization and in the larger community. As a result, the court system, board members, supporters and potential donors have the means to better evaluate the reliability of the organization's claims. Another significant impact of this project is the continued existence of ACA. At the onset of the study, the organization was in organizational and financial crisis, unable to afford hiring a firm to conduct the evaluation and research it needed to reposition itself for survival and growth. The broader impact on the court system and community is significant as well, as ACA remains the only organized, independent citizen presence in the courtroom. Information-related impacts for students were also significant. While conducting the research, both graduate and undergraduate students gained new skills and knowledge in research methods and the workings of the criminal court system. All student participants gained a deeper awareness of the challenges and vulnerabilities facing many nonprofits, and were introduced to new ways of thinking about citizen engagement in the criminal justice system. The hands-on nature of the project solidified key concepts related to both graduate research methods and program evaluation.

The true long-term impact of the project is that a large group of students gained practical professional development and intellectual growth in an applied setting. This experience will enhance their careers. In turn, their enhanced effectiveness as law enforcement and criminal justice professionals will benefit the professions and institutions they serve. Overall, the project contributed to goals closely held by both ACA and our academic unit. These include improving courtroom climate, increasing the courts' responsiveness to women and children, and to encourage public and civic engagement with the courts.

Relationships and Connections

The project facilitated relationships and connections that would not have otherwise existed. Connections developed over the course of the project produced a range of positive impacts on the immediate participants from the campus and in the community. Examples of these connections include connections made between individuals based in the organization and students and faculty on our campus. Many students were not aware of ACA and had never worked with a community-based organization.

The ACA project required collaborations and divisions of labor between several layers of the partnership including 1) between students, 2) between individual courses, 3) between two faculty members, 4) between students and representatives of the community partner, and 5) between faculty and the community partner. The findings of the project encouraged longer-term development of new connections between ACA and the broader community and the court system itself. The project created a

sense of possibility about partnering with community-based organizations. This project will serve as a foundation and template for the development of future partnerships.

Conclusion

Like a jigsaw puzzle, research and service work can be assembled collaboratively. In this project, each involved course—and each student—contributed unique pieces of research that combined to produce an original and groundbreaking piece of public scholarship about court monitoring with implications for criminal justice practice, nonprofit management, diversity awareness, and community involvement. The final report and the knowledge gleaned from the project were widely disseminated on campus and beyond. The project was shared, discussed, and digested in classrooms and discussed informally across student populations throughout the university community. It introduced a shared discussion agenda across the graduate and undergraduate student populations.

Most importantly, the research community's collective findings were carefully tailored to meet the needs of the community partner, where they found an appreciative audience well-positioned to apply the research to practice in the broader community. Ultimately, this project represented the core values of public scholarship for students, faculty, the university, and the community partner on a variety of levels, and it will be able to serve as a model for others seeking to become involved with similar work. It is the authors' hope that dissemination of the information about this project inspires others to undertake such work because public scholarship is the responsibility of faculty whose disciplines are inextricably linked to enhancing community relationships.

References

- ACA. (2013, April 8). Board of directors' meeting minutes. Minneapolis.
- Aronson, e. (2011). *Cooperation in the Classroom: The Jigsaw Method*. London: Pinter & Martin, Ltd.
- Court Watch NOLA. (2013). *Court watch NOLA report*. Retrieved from <http://www.courtwatchnola.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/04/Final-2013-Court-Watch-NOLA-Report.pdf>.
- Falk, A., Durlington, M., & Lakford, E. (2012). Engaging Sharp-Leadenhall: An interdisciplinary faculty collaboration in service-learning. *Journal of Public Scholarship in Higher Education*, 2, 31–46.
- Hoffman, A. J., & Doody, S. (2015). Build a fruit tree orchard and they will come: Creating an eco-identity via community gardening activities. *Community Development Journal*, 50(1), 104–120.
- Kimball, J. (2013, October 7). ACLU to close Bemidji racial discrimination office for budget reasons. *MINNPOST*. Retrieved from <http://www.minnpost.com/political-agenda/2013/10/aclu-close-bemidji-racial-discrimination-office-budget-reasons>.
- Kuh, J. (2008). *High Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities..
- Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications..
- Pompa, L. (2002). Service-learning as crucible: Reflections on immersion, context, power, and transformation. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, 9(1), 67.
- Pompa, L., & Crabbe, M. (2004). *The inside-out prison exchange program: Exploring issues of crime and justice behind the walls. Instructor's manual* (Rev. ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University.
- Williams, P. H., & Sparks, J. (2011). Collaborative inquiry at a children's museum: Benefits for student learning, museum outcomes, and faculty scholarship. *Journal of Public Scholarship in Higher Education*, 1, 31–46.
- Yi, Z., & LuXi, Z. (2012). Implementing a cooperative learning model in universities. *Educational Studies*, 38, 165–173.

Authors

Anne Cross, Ph.D. is a Professor in the School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice at Metropolitan State University where she teaches courses addressing community engagement and diversity issues in the criminal justice system. Her research has appeared in *Qualitative Sociology*, *Social Policy and Administration* and the *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*. Dr. Cross serves as Area Editor for the American Sociological Association's digital teaching resource library and on the board of directors of the Center for Homicide Research in St. Paul, Minnesota. She holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Minnesota and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Sociology from Yale University.

Deborah A. Eckberg, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at Metropolitan State University. Prior to her tenure as a faculty member, Dr. Eckberg was employed for thirteen years as a research analyst for the Fourth Judicial District Court of Minnesota and the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections, designing program evaluations and collecting and analyzing statistical data for a wealth of court and probation initiatives. Dr. Eckberg received her Ph.D. and M.A. degrees from the University of Minnesota, and her B.A. from Dartmouth College. Dr. Eckberg's research interests and publications cover a wide range of topics related to the court system (e.g., multiple DWI court, prosecutorial discretion in charging juvenile offenders, courtroom monitoring), as well as issues related to the intersection of culture and mental illness among criminal offenders and themes surrounding teaching research methods both graduate and undergraduate students.