New Models for Supporting Community-University Research Partnerships for Change

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The Research Shop

Community, Campus, Collaboration

The Research Shop serves as a portal between community and university research needs. We work with local and regional collaborations, develop community-based research projects, and support student and faculty in research and knowledge mobilization.

Origins
Conceptualized using the European Science Shop model and informed by the work of innovative intermediary organizations from Canada and elsewhere, members of the local Guelph and Wellington Community, graduate students, faculty and administrators worked together to build the Research Shop in 2009.

Current Status
The Research Shop is located in the Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship, an integral part of the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences. The Research Shop Intern program has provided community organizations and collaborations working in areas of poverty, food security, health, the drug strategy and environment, with the skills and knowledge of over 75 graduate students since inception, from many disciplines and departments within and beyond our College.

Research Shop Internships
Graduate students apply for a varying number of positions each semester and to 2 semesters (or more) of work (but stay longer!). Interns meet every 3 weeks in a peer learning setting, reviewing project plans and new opportunities to link across projects and methods. Interns are mentoring by staff and senior Ph.D. students who act as project managers for team projects. Complex projects have a principal investigator as well as student team. Students learn a variety of professional skills (project management, grant writing, negotiation/communication), depending on projects underway, and contribute their own expertise to interdisciplinary problem solving. Three groups of interns (up to 30) support each other as they learn in the community. Interns are trained to be flexible and responsive – projects do not always work out the way we expect them to!

Developmental Evaluation* – Lessons Learned:

Community engagement takes time and focus: Personal contacts into deeper commitment, often through involvement in a specific, concrete project.

Build more formal structures cautiously: Intern and project management practices constantly evolve, based on what is working and not working.

Respond to community needs as a primary focus: To bridge differences in project timing and scope between campus and community partnership, the Research Shop clarified the mandate so that responding to community needs is the primary focus – we only support efforts to train students or advance research agendas in situations where this work clearly meets community needs.

Understand the factors that motivate your partners:
Community partners see the Research Shop as a way to access resources including student time and professor expertise, as well as supporting generative civic engagement. Students interns appreciate the opportunity to develop skills in networking and collaborative project management that are rarely taught in graduate social science courses – skills that would be useful when seeking work after graduation. For university staff members, partnerships with the community were seen as a way to remain relevant and advance the university’s mission.

Outcomes:
• Productive Relationships
• Skills and Capacity for CES
• Resources and Research Products
• Change in perception of research

Transformative Learning
Working with the Research Shop is really a transformative learning experience – you’re not going to be the same when you come out as when you go in. Part of that is due to the stress of doing community-based work and the things that come along with that – the deadlines, the challenges – but part of that is also what you learn from other interns and taking a new perspective on what it means to be a researcher...I think differently about research than when I started the work. I’m much more open to other possibilities – different ways of doing research and thinking about research – and better understanding the community perspective on research and how they see researchers – which is often really different from how we see ourselves.

Learning through watching and doing
The opportunity to learn about different types of research methods and different ways that I could move forward and to meet individuals who have been doing community engaged work and see how it could look has been extremely beneficial and a great learning opportunity. As well, the practical experience of coordinating a community based research project and figuring out how that all works, and learning the steps of how decisions are made - and how to do that collaboratively - is also a completely valuable experience and something I will use in the future.

Community partners include:
• Guelph Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination
• FarmStart
• Guelph Wellington Drug Strategy Committee
• Guelph Environmental Leadership
• City of Guelph
• Guelph United Way
• Upper Grand District School Board
• WellCarders Ltd.
• Family & Children Services
• Community Resource Centre NCC
• Thames Mental Health Services
• GW Food Roundtable

*Developmental evaluation conducted by TaylorMcKenzie Consulting (2011).