Dissertation Overview: Building the Capacity of Community Engagement Professionals to Practice Inclusion of Racially Minoritized Students

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Abstract

This dissertation overview summarizes a study exploring how community engagement professionals (CEPs) can build their capacity to practice inclusion of racially minoritized students. With a foundation in empowerment evaluation, this participatory action research (PAR) project was designed as a professional development experience within a research study. Study participants included eight CEPs who were recruited through their affiliation with one state Campus Compact network. Qualitative data analysis revealed that as a result of the experience, participants demonstrated mostly cognitive and affective outcomes rather than behavioral outcomes. Positive outcomes were largely attributed to being a part of a community of learners, among individuals with a shared purpose and context. Participants improved their capacity to address personally mediated racism rather than institutionalized racism, reflecting a gap between the values CEPs develop through their education and field experience and the skills they actually practice in their professional roles.

Keywords: community engagement professionals, empowerment evaluation, higher education, inclusion, participatory action research

Introduction and Research Purpose

Since the late 20th century, colleges and universities have been called to reestablish their commitment to the public good and actively contribute to their community's ability to realize social progress for all of its members. Nonetheless, issues of access and equity within higher education persist. As college student demographics continue to shift, experiences of racially minoritized students remain at the forefront of this area of concern.

A logical connection might be expected between community engagement, a field that refers to diversity outcomes to promote its work *(Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015; Jones & Abes, 2004)*, and equity initiatives on college campuses. In fact, the two rarely coincide *(Dunlap, 1998; Hurtado, 2007; Musil, 2009;*

Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). Instead, community engagement efforts are often designed on the assumption that privileged college students (i.e., White, middle and upper class) have a responsibility to help people in need (i.e., low-income people of Color; *Butin, 2006; Gilbride-Brown, 2011; Green, 2003; Mitchell & Donahue, 2009*). In effect, the experiences of historically marginalized students participating in community engagement are largely ignored *(Gilbride-Brown, 2011; Mitchell & Donahue, 2009)*. For colleges and universities to truly meet their democratic commitment, engagement initiatives must be representative and inclusive of diverse student populations. In their absence, community engagement is in danger of perpetuating, rather than disrupting, inequity *(Verjee, 2012)*.

At the head of this work are community engagement professionals (CEPs). These are individuals whose *primary* role on campus is to support, advance, and administrate community–campus engagement *(Dostilio & Perry, 2017)*. Despite being the few professionals whose daily work involves community engagement, their experiences are largely absent from the literature, which tends to focus on the work and influence of faculty and upper level administrators. The purpose of this study was to develop strategies to enable CEPs to build their capacity to practice inclusion of racially minoritized students.

Research Methods

This study utilized a participatory action research (PAR) approach. In PAR, researchers and participants with a common goal of improving their practice or program work in partnership to investigate a problem or research question *(Wadsworth, 1998)*. Elden and Levin *(1991)* refer to the ways that PAR empowers participants to (a) gain insight into and construct new perspectives of their social world, (b) learn how to learn, and (c) develop new opportunities and strategies for taking action.

The PAR project was operationalized using empowerment evaluation, defined by Fetterman and Wandersman *(2005)* as

> an evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization. *(p. 28)*

In other words, empowerment evaluation places equal value on conventional evaluation outcomes and on outcomes realized by the *process* of evaluation *(Patton, 1997)*. This principle encourages and enables practitioners to continue their process of self-evaluation and improvement after the initial cycle of inquiry is complete.

PAR and empowerment evaluation have a number of overlapping goals and principles *(Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005)*. As a point of clarification, the empowerment evaluation process in this study sought to enable participants to evaluate their current work and *identify personal strategies* for practicing inclusion of racially minoritized students within the context of community engagement. The purpose of the broader participatory action research project was to use empowerment evaluation to consider how CEPs can *build their capacity* to practice inclusion of racially minoritized students.

The participants in this project included eight CEPs, representing six predominantly White institutions of higher education in the rural Midwest. Of the eight individuals, six identified as White women. One participant identified as a woman of Color, and one as a White male. Although participants were not selected by race or sex, composition of this group reflects overrepresentation of White women in the field. The group was recruited through their affiliation with one state Campus Compact network.

The entire project lasted 6 months, with two individual interviews bookending the experience. The first component of the group process was to establish a shared online workspace where participants collectively drafted a mission statement for the project. The group agreed on this final version of the statement:

> The mission of this project is to provide an intentional space for community engagement professionals to actively consider the implications of community engagement work for racially minoritized students, and use that lens to critically examine their current practice. Drawing on existing research and engaging in critical reflection, participants are committed to taking necessary action to ensure the needs of racially minoritized students are being addressed.

To begin, participants completed a self-assessment to evaluate themselves and their practice regarding inclusion of racially minoritized students. The tool was created using the multicultural organizational development model *(Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004)*,

Indicators of a Redefining/Multicultural Organization (Obear, 2011), Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (ACPA & NASPA, 2010), and *Fostering Cultures of Inclusion in the Classroom (Quaye & Chang, 2012)*. The questions were divided into three categories: the self (personal awareness and behaviors), individual work (one's professional practice), and departmental (department/office policies and practice).

Next, the group came together for a half-day retreat to reflect on the results of the self-assessment through guided activities and to begin considering action steps. The group agreed more time was needed, so monthly virtual meetings were scheduled. After 4 months, group members decided to work individually, at their own pace and in their own style, to identify and take action steps. Data was gathered at each phase of the project and was analyzed using first cycle and second cycle coding *(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014)*.

Conceptual Framework

Empowerment evaluation, the conceptual framework for this study, is guided by empowerment theory, self-determination theory, evaluation capacity building, process use, and theories of use and action *(Fetterman, 2015)*. This foundation is captured in the 10 core principles of empowerment evaluation: improvement, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, evidence-based strategies, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability *(Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005)*.

The PAR project was grounded in these 10 principles with a special emphasis on capacity building and improvement. The approach is designed to "improve, not prove" *(Fetterman, 2001, p. 15)*, offering CEPs the opportunity to evaluate their current practice while also building skills for self-evaluation and critical reflection so the benefits of their participation are ongoing. Rather than having an outside evaluator identify problems and possible solutions, CEPs were given tools to do this for themselves, increasing buy-in and the likelihood of acting on their discoveries.

The principles of empowerment evaluation are well aligned with the values of community engagement *(Fetterman, 2001)*. It is a democratic process and requires participants to be open and honest in their conversations in order to generate authentic findings. The collaborative experience creates an opportunity for a "dynamic community of transformative learning" *(Fetterman, 2001, p. 7)*. At

the heart of empowerment evaluation is an emphasis on community ownership and social justice, ideals that also guide the daily work of CEPs. Not only is the process of empowerment evaluation one that CEPs are more likely to resonate with because of their experiences in community engagement, it also involves a skill set that they can apply in their professional practice.

Findings and Conclusions

Findings revealed that the individual capacity-building outcomes of the project were mostly cognitive and affective. CEPs expressed an increased awareness, particularly in terms of how their own experiences are racialized. Consequently, they described being more conscious of their internal and external reaction in those moments. The group identified new resources and shared a desire to continue their learning, acknowledging blind spots in how their own work has been shaped by race. Individuals demonstrated an increased confidence and discussed feeling more empowered to lean into difficult conversations, centering race even when it might not be well received by colleagues or students. Interestingly, this corresponded with the recognition that racial justice work will always be difficult, and that being uncomfortable is a necessary part of the process.

Although it might be presumed that such cognitive and affective outcomes will result in changes to behavior, there was a marked gap in participants' behavioral outcomes, despite the emphasis on identifying and taking steps toward action. Individuals talked about changing their approach at work, and White participants discussed viewing their practice through a new lens. Many ideas for change were considered. However, few participants identified any actionable changes or plans for implementing change. Their goals for the future tended to emphasize self-work, which is certainly valuable, but is distinct from changing one's practice, particularly in a way that will impact policies and structures.

More specifically, empowerment evaluation is intended to develop individuals' evaluation capacity *(Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005)*, which could be categorized as a behavioral outcome. Beyond an increased capacity for internal assessment, there was little evidence that CEPs walked away from the project more equipped to conduct evaluation. Interestingly, they spoke to the value of the practice but looked to external sources (e.g., Campus Compact) to perform the work rather than seeing themselves as producing evaluative information.

In considering ways to build capacity, participants attributed the outcomes they achieved to the group process. The CEPs found value in being a part of a community of learners, a core tenet of empowerment evaluation *(Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005)*. Participants expressed appreciation for their peers and for the opportunity to learn with and from others who share the same commitment and challenges. Collectively, the group demonstrated a commitment to continuously improving their practice and identified their relationships with one another as essential to that process. Notably, participants acknowledged that knowing one another beforehand and having a shared context (i.e., private schools in a mostly White, rural state) was also important in their learning and willingness to be open.

Significance of the Research

This study contributes to a relatively small body of knowledge around CEPs and considers how these individuals shape, and are shaped by, the field. The findings highlight a gap between what CEPs come to value through the education and professional development they receive as a part of the field, such as concern with social justice and systemic change *(Clark & Nugent, 2011; Mitchell, 2008; Rosenberger, 2000; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009)*, and the skills they develop and practice through their role as CEPs.

When considering levels of racism *(Jones, 2000)*, participants showed greater capacity for addressing personally mediated racism than for disrupting institutionalized racism. For the most part, the emphasis was on individual identities rather than structures and systems. In other words, participants spoke more about White privilege than White supremacy. This parallels criticism of community engagement in higher education that the work emphasizes changes for individuals rather than addressing systemic and structural inequity *(Eby, 1998; Herzberg, 1994; O'Grady, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000)*.

CEPs generally felt that their institutional power was limited, and those who had been in their role for multiple years reflected on how much their responsibilities shift as changes occur within their institution. They commented on reporting lines and organizational priorities that impact their day-to-day work. Perhaps most notable, it was clear that participants consistently feel they have too much to do in too little time and that the majority of their time is spent on reactionary rather than strategic work.

Although these factors do not fully explain the gap in behavioral outcomes, it is worth considering the challenge CEPs face when applying their professional learning from the community engagement field to individual contexts that vary considerably. In particular, newer professionals might be seeking more support, but the guidance they receive from their institutional superiors will likely differ from that provided by the broader field.

The findings offer insight into the experiences of CEPs as they work to support equity and racial justice on campus. Additionally, results of the evaluation process can be examined to consider what aspects of the experience contributed to CEPs' learning and growth, why behavioral outcomes were significantly fewer than cognitive and affective, and what types of experiences might achieve different results.

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