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*The action-research model enables integration of three different academic responsibilities: research, teaching, and service. Action-research combines the need for data about pressing social concerns at the local level with the need of students to learn about applied research. Students are actually involved in the design and implementation of a research study that is responsive to specific data needs in the community. The data collection and subsequent analysis allow the faculty member to publish research that can be a distinct service to the community while meeting instructional workload requirements. Students find the hands-on opportunity to participate in a study to be a challenging and rewarding experience.*

# Action Research:

## *A Practical Model to Link Teaching, Research, and Community Service*

Since 1980, the Gerontology Institute and Center at the University of Massachusetts Boston, like many other programs, has offered a course each year that teaches undergraduate students firsthand about applied social science research. What distinguishes the UMass Boston gerontology experience from other programs is that, rather than working on individual projects, the entire class helps design and conduct a single, large-scale study that is of benefit to the local community. Data from the study may be used as material for subsequent academic analysis and publication by the instructor. Such studies, known as “action research,” are done as a public service by the university. They are designed eventually to influence public policy or administrative procedures in the state or locality.

The UMass Boston course that specializes in the use of action research has grown increasingly sophisticated over the years; there is a rich array of accumulated experience. The

model refined in Boston described here will provide the reader with a context for designing an action-research course. For those interested in trying to integrate the disparate roles of teaching, research, and community service through classroom instruction, the article examines specific steps to consider in assessing the feasibility of conducting action research.

### **Elements of the Action-Research Project**

An action-research course begins with a pressing issue in need of study. Ideas may be generated by faculty, students, or the community. At UMass Boston, in the term prior to the action-research study, agencies and programs outside the university are asked to submit requests for studies. The solicitation of project ideas may be a formal or an informal process. The faculty member teaching the course in consultation with the department's administrative unit determines the feasibility of undertaking the proposed study. Key to the decision is a collaborative relationship with the external organization. In all cases, the participating organization or agency will have to contribute in some direct way to the study. This may be in the form of identifying and gaining access to the sample, presenting class lectures on the issue being studied, or providing assistance with project costs.

In selecting the project for study, the faculty member needs to weigh the issues, such as sample access and size, the student resources available to conduct sufficient interviews to produce a meaningful data set, and the complexity of the issue—highly technical issues do not lend themselves well to this form of research. For example, the changes in functional status in patients relocated from chronic care to acute care settings is an important area of study but may not have a strong appeal to a broader audience that includes practitioners, legislators, the media, and the students themselves. In addition, the faculty member must consider the perceived need in the profession, whether or not students will find the subject compelling as well as the scheduling, costs, and logistics.

Once the subject of study and the cooperating agency have been identified, a formal agreement is prepared between the university and the agency, spelling out expected roles and responsibilities. This helps clarify obligations from the outset. Leaders in the field are also identified and an advisory board is named. The advisory board can assist in identification of important

readings, sample access, review of draft questionnaires, and discussion of preliminary findings. In the UMass Boston model, the advisory board meets two or three times—at least once at the outset of the project, perhaps a second time to review a draft questionnaire, and then again at the conclusion of the study to examine its findings and consider policy and program recommendations.

Instructors of action-research classes face at least three challenges once a commitment to such a project is made. They must teach the traditional methods of applied research, provide readings and information on the area of study, and actually conduct a study during the term. The major challenge is that all three tasks must take place simultaneously.

The research design is developed during the prior term by the instructor and research assistant in consultation with members of the advisory board and the department's administrative unit. During the course the instructor works with the class to refine the research design and create the research instrument. He or she trains the students in how to collect and record data. At UMass Boston, three to four weekends are devoted to data collection, and students are required to sign up for 20 hours of such work. Additional regular class meetings during the data collection period are scheduled at the discretion of the instructor. Just to be clear on course expectations, students are asked to sign a course contract at the start of the term that clearly articulates what work they will be doing. The students also sign a statement of confidentiality assuring that information identifying individuals will not be discussed with anyone outside the research team. In addition, the instructor needs to prepare all documents for internal or external human subject reviews and seek approvals pending the submission of a final questionnaire. Ideally, this process should occur either prior to or early in the academic term in which the course is taught.

In UMass Boston's 15-week model of action-research, there is simply not enough time to conduct an entire study as well as code and analyze data. Data analysis takes place after the course is completed. Once preliminary findings are available, however, both students and advisory board members are brought together to examine the results. Draft copies of the report are also made available later to students for their review and comment. If the report has enough significance to warrant a press conference, students may

be asked to play a role in it. After one such study, a press conference was scheduled at the State House, and students presented the results to the media and the public.

### **Example of Studies and Their Impact**

Two recent examples of action-research projects undertaken at UMass Boston include a project on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) (Silverstein & Rosenberg, 1995) and one on wandering behavior in community-residing persons with Alzheimer's disease (Silverstein & Salmons, 1996). In the first example, the Gerontology Institute was approached by Families USA, a national advocacy organization that had been doing outreach to low-income elders. The organization had provided training to case managers across the state on SSI screening procedures through a demonstration grant funded through the Social Security Administration (SSA). Their efforts resulted in 1,945 elders screened, with 522 individuals ultimately referred to Social Security as possible candidates for SSI. Families USA asked the Gerontology Institute to do a follow-up study to learn why individuals screened as eligible for SSI succeeded or failed to succeed in obtaining benefits. They provided the sample list and updated information from SSA, names and phone numbers for each of the 27 home care corporations that participated in the earlier demonstration project, and postage and letterhead for letters of introduction sent prior to the telephone follow-up. Staff served on the advisory board and as guest lecturers in the action-research class. A major finding of the gerontology study was that those elders who were successful in getting SSI benefits were likely to have had the assistance of an advocate—a case worker or family member, for example. Other elders, left on their own to file the necessary paperwork and produce the needed documentation, were less likely to complete the application process. It was this finding that led the Gerontology Institute to seek foundation support to produce a 16-page pamphlet entitled *Helping Low Income Elders Apply to SSI*. This pamphlet was made available at no cost to Massachusetts elders and their advocates.

In the second project example, on Alzheimer's disease, the Gerontology Institute was asked by the Alzheimer's Association of Eastern Massachusetts to conduct a study on wandering behavior on the part of Alzheimer's sufferers as well as others with related disorders. Wandering behavior in

this study was defined as walking or driving away from the home or family unsupervised. This study would assist the Association and the Attorney General's Office in their training of law enforcement officers on how to respond to reports of wanderers. The Association made available its Safe Return registry of about 900 community-residing Massachusetts residents with cognitive impairments. Safe Return is a national wanderers' alert program sponsored by the Association in cooperation with the U.S. Justice Department. Advisory board members were recruited from the Alzheimer's Association, the state Attorney General's office, the state Executive Office of Elder Affairs, elder housing, adult day health facilities, and home care agencies. Representatives from the Alzheimer's Association and from the Attorney General's office served as guest lecturers providing background on Alzheimer's disease and the role of law enforcement. The Alzheimer's Association sent out the introductory letter seeking cooperation from caregivers. Telephone interviews were conducted over four weekends with 463 caregivers of persons registered in Safe Return. Descriptive data on how far people wandered, how long they were missing, and how police responded were of immediate use to the Alzheimer's Association in their training program.

Findings revealed how many caregivers were not following the procedures recommended by Safe Return, particularly in regard to the program's advice that they not search for the wanderer by themselves beyond 15 minutes before notifying Safe Return. It was also found that caregivers as a group did not universally understand the need for supervision of the person with dementia. These findings are the kind that may lead to applied interventions.

### **Why Consider Action-Research?**

With heavy course loads and increasing demands and pressures on faculty, why should anyone consider teaching a course that brings the added responsibility of carrying out a research study? Doesn't teaching that involves action research require more work?

Action-research courses combine teaching with faculty research opportunities. They force a faculty member to examine pressing issues in his or her field. They also confront the dichotomy of teaching versus research. Professors can no longer say that they were unable to conduct research be-

cause of a heavy teaching load—the research is part of the teaching load. For some people, the added pressure and the accountability—the fact that something has to be done on the study every week and that many people are depending on them to produce something—are welcome incentives when they are faced with competing demands. Action-research requires a faculty member who is well organized and reliable when it comes to deadlines.

Action research also provides a link between the academy and the community that may not have existed prior to the research. Action-research projects are conducted in cooperation with state and local agencies, for-profit institutions, and nonprofit organizations. They are partnerships in which each party brings something different to the research process. Questions that are examined are those that the professional community finds pressing. They may or may not be central to the existing research literature, but they are questions of significant concern to the communities outside the university.

The link between the community and the university has many advantages, some of which may not be obvious at the start. For example, if the study is done well and provides useful information to the participating agency or organization, that organization is indebted to the researchers, the students, and the university. Such friendships can be very helpful in future funding struggles or in gaining access for future research. In the long run, these external constituencies can benefit the institution in the most unpredictable ways. The outside partner may be a useful resource, as well, for practical knowledge that the faculty member or the department needs.

From the point of view of student learning, action-research takes students out of the safe and protected world of the academy and has them confront the practical problems of applied research. Course material on determining the size of a sample, for example, takes on a very different meaning when one actually tries to implement a study. Students gain a richer and deeper understanding of the intellectual issues confronted in research design and data collection. The hands-on experience obligates them to learn research methods, interview techniques, and record-keeping in a way not possible through the standard textbook approach. And, the depth of understanding of social problems is much more extensive for a student who is confronted as an interviewer with real people coping with real-life circumstances. Stu-

dents report that an action-research experience has a lasting impact in terms of demonstrable skills attained. Students also benefit by increasing their networking in terms of employment opportunities, and the experience may also strengthen a student's resume.

Of secondary benefit, in addition to the structured opportunity for faculty publication, new connections in the community, and rich opportunities for student learning about applied research and social problems, action research offers the university a certain visibility. The benefits might be in program recognition and in faculty and student recruitment.

Nevertheless, action research is more work than traditional instruction, and admittedly there are distinct disadvantages. It takes time to arrange and organize a project. Once the term begins, the instructor faces the constraints and schedule of the course. Because of the various responsibilities in conducting a study and analyzing data, action-research projects are best handled over a two-term sequence. At UMass Boston, both one- and two-term formats are used. In the one year certificate program, the first semester is devoted to planning by the faculty member and research assistant, and the students become full participants during the second semester. In the optional advanced certificate program, students are involved in both the planning and implementation of the project over the two semester period.

Difficulties may occur when a research project is under way and problems come up that require enormous energy and creativity to resolve, problems such as gaining approval for access to a state agency sample, or having attrition in the sample, or discovering that telephone numbers assigned to the sample are incorrect. There may be language barriers, or an untold number of small but frustrating setbacks. In such situations, the faculty member and students are forced to adjust to the situation, just as other researchers must when conducting a study.

Action research may require protracted negotiations with agencies reluctant to participate in the study. Their reluctance comes from the uncertainty as to what the study findings will be. For the university, the findings of the study may have little consequence, but for the agency, the results might be critical for their future survival. The researchers must be independent of such political considerations. The data must fall where they may; the university is obligated to report the full findings of the study. How to deal

with the fact that research outcomes are unpredictable should be discussed ahead with the partner organization.

Finally, action research involves collaboration and cooperation among many different groups. Therefore, ownership of the final report is shared. All the students who participated as well as those from any cooperating organizations are credited in the report. Action-research is a shared enterprise.

### **Assessing the Feasibility of Conducting Action Research**

The following steps should be considered in assessing whether or not action research might be feasible within a particular academic setting.

1. Choose a project that is likely to be of broad interest and timely. Consider a project that has a direct link to a cooperating agency or department and is consistent with a faculty member's interests.
2. Involve a faculty member who will be available to develop the project design, supervise its implementation, and be sufficiently motivated and/or compensated to see the project through to completion.
3. Choose a specific format. Will it be a one or two-semester undergraduate course? Which and how many students will participate?
4. Assess your institution's commitment. Talk to the department heads first and then to the institutional administrators. Prepare a 3-to-5 page concept paper that describes the project, the type of help and commitment you are seeking, and a proposed budget. Consider asking for the following in your request: research and teaching assistants, work-study students, technical assistance for data entry and analysis, clerical support, photocopying, postage, telephone (general and long distance), fax, computer availability, office space, and printing and dissemination funds for the final report.
5. Assess the outside agency's commitment of resources. Are there any needed resources that may be assumed, shared, or matched with the agency that is cooperating with the project? Specific resources that might be asked for are: letterhead, postage, aid in sample selection and data collection, assistance of volunteers or staff, people to serve on an advisory board, sponsorship of an advisory meeting, and provision of a financial contribution for supplies.
6. Recruit an advisory board. Definitely include one or more represen-

tatives from the cooperating agency. Are there other key people outside the academic program that might be asked to serve on an advisory board? Are there other faculty members either inside or outside the department that may be interested in serving on the board? Consider adding consumers of the service to the board.

7. Be aware of the necessary procedures to follow and deadlines for both internal review and external human subjects review committees.

## Conclusion

Action research transcends the classroom experience by offering benefits to faculty, to students, to the university, and to the larger community. Because it demands rigorous attention to the planning and implementation of a research design, the faculty member is likely to have a stronger investment in the outcome. The student views him or herself as an active participant in the development and implementation and takes pride in ownership of the project experience. The university benefits by increased visibility through a hands-on community outreach effort. The community agency, recognizing the value of partnership in conducting research, is appreciative of the joint venture and likely to keep the university program in mind for appropriate referrals in the future. Thus, if the faculty interest, university support, and community need exist, action-research is a win-win proposition.

### *Suggested Readings:*

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