

The Power of Real-World Experience: Community-based Research at Keene State

Keene State College sociology professor Therese Seibert didn't find it unusual that her research methods students were complaining about their assignment on focus-group facilitation. What was unusual, though, was the alternative assignment the students proposed: conducting real focus groups. "The students told me they wished they could actually do research instead of doing hypothetical problems for a grade," Seibert remembers. "They said that if they had to take research methods, could they do real research?"

That 1999 class and its proposal was the spark that prompted Seibert to found Keene State's Community Research Center in 2001. The CRC has the dual mission of promoting research skills and professional development among Keene State students and serving the research needs of nonprofit agencies in New Hampshire's Monadnock region. Seibert researched other institutions with similar centers, and modeled Keene State's center after a social science research center at Wayne State University in Detroit. The CRC works only with local nonprofit agencies, carrying out projects like survey administration, focus groups, and creating and testing survey instruments. Students also analyze and present data to community clients.

Mutual Benefits

The beauty of the CRC lies in its simplicity and its connection with the college's learning goals, says Gordon Leverage, Keene State's dean for sciences and social sciences. "Our college motto is 'Enter to learn, go forth to serve,'" he says. "The CRC is a perfect fit for us-these nonprofit agencies do good work and have great needs, and our students really benefit from learning while working with them."

Students come to the Community Research Center through a class, currently called Community Studies, which serves as practicum for upper-level research methods. Students are mostly juniors and seniors, and the majority are sociology majors, although students from other social science disciplines occasionally take the class as well, says Seibert, who currently directs the center and teaches Community Studies. A more basic research- methods class is a prerequisite for Community Studies, so students begin the class prepared to work on real-world problems.

The agencies that serve as CRC clients are mostly local and state nonprofits and government agencies-mental health and family services, housing-assistance groups, and child-advocate groups. Students start by assessing each client's research needs and preparing a plan. Frequent requests include surveys to measure demographic information, an agency's customer satisfaction, or the effectiveness of a particular project. CRC students often work on projects from inception through completion, including creating and testing the survey instruments (often using other Keene research-methods classes as test subjects), conducting surveys or focus groups, evaluating and analyzing results, and presenting the results to agency officials, staff, or board members. Occasionally, students present their work on an even bigger stage-like the New Hampshire state legislature, Seibert says.

"There's a lot of research showing that if students are emotionally invested in a project, the learning is deeper," she explains. "The excitement and accountability really go up when they are not just working for a grade. Students do not want to let these agencies down."

Adapting to Student and Community Needs

Since 2001, the CRC has been through several iterations as Seibert, Lerversee, and other Keene State faculty members have explored and clarified its goals. At first, Seibert says, she charged community agencies a nominal fee for the research assistance students provided. But she quickly realized that the need for research services was so large that she and her students couldn't keep up with all the projects agencies were willing to fund. She wanted the center to focus on the quality, not the quantity, of the projects it completed. "We quit charging agencies a fee and stopped taking on so many projects," Seibert explains. "I'm a professor and my first responsibility is to the students, so now I determine what I want students to learn, and then we seek out agencies that have research needs that can work with these learning outcomes."

Keene State Students

Students must take an introductory-level statistics course before enrolling in Community Studies, ensuring that they are ready to tackle real-world problems. Photograph by Mark Corliss

Keene State is a member of Campus Compact, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing community-based learning and service learning on college and university campuses, and is also a participant in Campus Compact's "Engaged Departments" project, in which service learning is pursued at a departmental level. Campus Compact is also a partner to AAC&U in its Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement. Keene State received a Learn and Serve Grant through Campus Compact, a three-year award to help fund service learning activities on campus. The CRC receives some funding through this grant, Lerversee says. "A little bit of funding goes a long way, and even a small grant can be really validating to what people are doing," he says. Seibert emphasizes that the CRC is effective partly because it doesn't require substantial funding or overhead costs. "Our expenses are pretty low-no higher than for a regular class. If we have to photocopy hundreds of surveys, the agencies pay for that, and for mailings, too. But the benefit is that they don't have to pay for the research assistance we provide."

The CRC also helps Keene State College maintain a good relationship with the city of Keene, New Hampshire-community members like seeing Keene students out working in the community, and the center helps the college gain local friends and supporters, Lerversee says.

Authentic Research Experiences

While its ability to promote good community relationships is important, Lerversee says the biggest benefit of the CRC is that it provides students with authentic research experiences that, in many cases, influence the paths they take after leaving Keene State, whether for graduate school or for employment. "Students are taking this work very seriously," he says. "The ability to give students both engaged learning and work with real clients is hugely helpful for them in discerning what their interests are and what their next steps will be after higher education. It's also developmentally beneficial-it really improves students' work ethic. Their CRC commitments are usually at the top of their list."

Keene State senior Stephenie Konopka took Community Studies in spring 2008 and worked on program assessment with the Keene Family YMCA and on a grant-writing project for an agency serving at-risk youth. When Community Studies was over, Konopka decided to take an independent sociology practicum course the following semester that placed her in a local private school as a curriculum coordinator. Now a few weeks away from graduation, she plans to remain at the school working to formally document curricular practices through the spring, after which she'll attend graduate school or apply for a job with the Keene Community Health Department. Her curricular and career interests were both influenced by her CRC experience, she says. "Statistics was a 'dry' course, and to see it actually being used with real data and knowing that the data is being used for a greater good made it more interesting and more palatable," Konopka says. "I think the biggest benefit to me was seeing the practical applications of our work in real life."

In the future, Seibert and Leverage say the CRC will continue to refine its niche as a community partner that provides students with hands-on research experience. "As we've gotten more successful, we've raised the bar in terms of the scope of projects we take on, and the quality," Leverage says. "We could have spun this off into a professional income-generating venture, but we wanted to stay with our roots. We're in a good place."

More information about Keene State College's Community Research Center can be found online.

<http://www.keene.edu/crc/research.cfm>