

[*Editor's Note.* This article appeared in the Education Connection column in *The Community Psychologist*, Fall 2002, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 22-24. Its approach brings community leaders into a graduate classroom to analyze a real-life, local community problem. *The Community Psychologist* is a benefit of membership in the Society for Community Research and Action (see elsewhere in this website for information on joining SCRA).]

Students and Community Members as Problem Solving Partners

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Many college instructors want to strengthen classroom links to the community. And there are numerous ways to do this: guest speakers, site visits, research projects, and internships are just a few examples. All these methods are useful and important, but one frequent limitation is that most of the benefits flow to the student. Community guests and hosts may be willing participants; but given the nature of the college course, the primary focus is on what the student can derive from the experience.

We have utilized a somewhat different approach, one that also promotes student learning about community life, but that in addition provides more substantive community rewards, with the added advantage of joining students and community members as problem solving partners for live community issues. In this model, community leaders give real problems for students to solve in advance of class; students generate advance solutions; those proposed solutions are then discussed together with the community leader submitting the problem. An earlier version of this model has been described in these pages previously (Berkowitz, 1988).

We have recently expanded this model by including some additional features: (1) generating a community-wide "RFP" for problem submission; (2) publicizing the problems and the discussion to the community at large; (3) sharing solutions among student participants prior to discussion; and (4) creating a discussion forum that also allows for informal social contact and networking. Through these additions, community problem solving can become more inclusionary, connections among community members can be tightened, and linkages between the community and the University (as well as to our psychology graduate program) can be strengthened.

Last fall we tested this expanded model successfully within a graduate course on community and organizational change. Several months before the course started, we sent out a mailing to about 300 local organizations, announcing the course format and providing a response form for those interested in submitting a problem to us. About 25 community representatives replied, thus giving us the opportunity to choose the most promising potential topics for the six 75-minute evening slots we had available. Selection was made primarily on the basis of estimated relevance to course content. All those contacted accepted our invitation. Our chosen problems dealt with inter-agency cooperation, racism, affordable housing, elder homelessness, runaway children, and bridging the digital divide (see example at end of article).

Immediately after the schedule was set, notices about the planned community discussion sessions were sent to the same community mailing list. The sessions were also

publicized in campus print media, by flyer distribution, on local list-servs, and in the city paper. Any community member wishing a preview version of the problem to be discussed could request and receive an e-mailed or printed copy. Attendance and participation at the sessions were open to all.

Meanwhile, all problem presenters were sent written guidelines for framing their problem to our class, along with a problem sample. Presenters were then asked to send us a short (1-2 page) written problem statement, together with specific questions, at least two weeks before their class visit. Upon its receipt, students generated one-page responses to the problem and questions submitted, drawing upon the community change principles they had been studying. These responses were collected, then e-mailed back to the problem presenter as well as to other students; in that way, both the presenter and the students would have access to all proposed solutions prior to the classroom visit. Finally, when our guest came to class, the primary emphasis was on discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the student solutions, as well as on generating other ideas of practical value in responding to the problem posed.

Students responded quite favorably to these discussion programs. In evaluations conducted after all sessions were completed, using a 0-10 point scale where 10 = most positive, students were asked how interesting the sessions were for them, how much they promoted learning about community change, whether the sessions were a good use of class time, whether the sessions should be repeated in future classes, and also to provide an overall rating. Mean rating scores for all questions were 7.5 or higher.

Guest presenters responded favorably as well, as indicated in part by at least one presenter finding new volunteers from among those attending, by another relaying our combined action recommendations to her superiors in writing, and by several unsolicited notes from presenters thanking us for the discussion opportunity. In addition, more than 60 other guests attended the sessions, including primarily directors and staff of other community agencies, but also leaders of neighborhood organizations, ordinary citizens, and university students not enrolled in our class. Participation rates from these guests were high; social time and refreshments before and after the sessions also allowed for informal contact opportunities.

We hope to extend, refine, and institutionalize this problem-solving model in future semesters, through better-crafted and better-targeted publicity and through improved problem, question, and solution guidelines. We also envision creating an open list-serv for those wishing to be part of the discussion, so that both problem solutions and critiques can be posted both before and after the live presentations. A more inclusive community web space for general problem discussion is another active possibility, and is now under development.

As psychologists and social scientists, we know that relationships are built when common goals are present. We believe this partnership model, which focuses on common goals, is one that holds much promise for strengthening college-community relationships, for providing specific and mutual benefits, and for being adaptable to a wide variety of educational settings.

Reference

Berkowitz, B. (1988). Case exercises in community psychology training. The Community Psychologist, 22(1), 16-17.

Problem Statement

“Runaway and Missing Youth” 1

The numbers of runaway and missing youth have varied locally from year to year.

But regardless of the actual numbers, a significant percentage of these youth repeatedly run away from home and become involved in crime.

To verify this phenomenon, we have followed all repeat runaways since 1996. Almost **all** these youth had involvement with the Lowell Police Department as offenders; almost **half** had been charged with a crime and arraigned in court as juveniles, many for violent offenses. Moreover, a **third** of the youth continued to commit serious crime as they became adults.

We know a lot about these youth. Their mean age is 14. Most live in poorer neighborhoods. Forty percent are male, 60% female. All races and ethnic groups are represented, though Asian youth disproportionately so. Repeat runaways typically account from between one-third and one-half of all reported incidents.

When a youth is reported missing, an officer is mandated to attempt retrieval. Alternatively, if the child is involved in the system as a CHINS (child in need of services), the police apprehend the child, who is then arraigned in court as an offender.

These facts lead to several problems and questions for discussion:

1. If our goal is to prevent these youth from repeatedly running away, and from transitioning into criminal offending, **Should our response be punitive? Is another type of response preferable? Should police be the primary responders? Who else might need to become involved?**

2. There is a strong case for decriminalizing the running away behavior of adolescents, focusing instead on the reasons why these youth are leaving home. But this creates a dilemma for police, who are not well equipped to provide such services. **Should such services, or other services, be provided? And who should realistically provide them?**

3. Based upon what we know about youth, and about the Lowell community, what other responses to prevent youth from running away or becoming missing might be considered? And (especially for our psych students) what principles of psychology or community change might come into play here?

¹ Adapted from a longer problem statement submitted by Robin Smith, Juvenile Crime Analyst, Lowell Police Department.