

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

Integrating citizen voices in community and economic revitalization.

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Community psychology is working to integrate citizen voices in community and economic revitalization. Dr. Craig C. Brookins and two graduate students, Brittany Cofield-Poole and Amanda Matson, in the Psychology in the Public Interest Program at North Carolina State University are currently involved in a collaborative project, *Uncovering Southwest Raleigh*. The project seeks to engage and *raise the voices* of citizens from Southwest Raleigh to develop a comprehensive plan that will improve community and economic revitalization. The project emerged from dialogue between the City of Raleigh and faculty in the College of Design, Management, and Humanities and Social Science from North Carolina State University. It has multiple aims and goals that include developing strategies that will allow Southwest Raleigh citizens to “enhance and promote a healthy, creative and economically sustainable future for the district” (Uncovering Southwest Raleigh, 2012).

Brookins, Cofield-Poole and Matson bring their knowledge and training in community psychology to the project and seek to 1) *engage individual citizens* from Southwest Raleigh; 2) capture their diverse voices; and 3) *raise the voices* of those least-heard through multiple methods. Brookins has served in the field of Community Psychology for more than twenty-years, including work across the continent of Africa, rites-of-passage programs for African American youth, and evaluation projects for numerous community-based intervention programs. His

expertise accompanied by that of Cofield-Poole and Matson's has lifted the importance of *citizen participation, collaboration* and focus on community strengths, and *empowerment*. Last year the team, along with a group of undergraduate students, conducted the first phase of data collection to include:

- ***Brief Registration Survey***: The survey was administered to about 130 citizens to obtain preliminary demographic data.
- ***Clickers*** (Audience Response System Technology): Responses were collected and timed from participants who attended the community kick-off celebration. Participants used remote control devices and were able to see the range of responses and engage in dialogue about it immediately. The team used this technique to promote immediate feedback from participants that is not evident in paper-pencil surveys.
- ***Focus Groups/Mapping***: Participants were asked about their perception of Southwest Raleigh boundaries and where their neighborhoods were situated. This method allowed the team to delineate the difference between boundaries developed by the city versus those identified by the citizens. Participants were also asked to identify the three most important factors impacting their daily lives and five things they would showcase about their neighborhood.
- ***Writing Wall***: This technique was adopted from a community arts project started by Candy Chang, an artist that integrates street art in urban planning and activism. Participants were provided with a large empty writing space with the words "What I like most about Southwest Raleigh is..." and instructions to write in their response.

The project also plans to use *visual voice*, a participatory approach that will include youth and eventually senior citizens. By using this innovative and creative method youth serve as the

driving force and researchers as the facilitators of the project. This method emerged from Photovoice and incorporates the use of digital images/video to obtain participant perceptions of community, assets and visions for the future (Wang & Burris, 1997). Integrating such an approach promotes meaningful input by the citizens who influence community structures, practices and sociocultural norms. Furthermore, this counters what Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) describe as policies and programs that are “conceived in the absence of meaningful input from those most affected by them” (p. 55).

There are some preliminary lessons gathered from the project. For one, projects that are interdisciplinary can create *tension* associated with different perspectives and values. Brookins and his team appear to engage the most with the community, use more practical skills and work to ensure citizens perceive them as partners. Secondly, the team is brainstorming on ways to engage a more diverse pool of citizens. Unfortunately, the majority of citizens who showed up during the kick-off event were White, middle class, retired and highly educated.

This project demonstrates how citizens are not used as "subjects of a study" but are actively engaged and working to revitalize their community. Furthermore, the skills community psychologists bring to the fold are essential in assisting citizens to develop a community vision for the future.

References:

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This is part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.