Speaking up, Speaking out

Urban doctoral students voices

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DOING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED WORK AS DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Latosha Rowley: As a third-year doctoral student in the IUPUI Urban Education Studies program, and a graduate assistant in the IUPUI Office of Community Engagement (IUPUI OCE), I engaged in an inquiry-based, collaborative relationship with a local community partner in a study designed to explore the effectiveness of their center's programming. In addition to my research work with a local community center, I have the privilege of working with and engaging in research around a middle school mentoring program with two Indianapolis Public Schools, Girl Talk, where I facilitate the mentoring connection between IUPUI undergraduate student mentors and middle school girl mentees.

Susan Kigamwa: As a first-year doctoral student in the IUPUI Urban Education Studies program and a development officer in the IUPUI Office of Community Engagement (IUPUI OCE) I have the enviable role of linking innovative proposals and research opportunities to the appropriate funding resources. In my doctoral studies, I am developing an inquiry approach to examining and understanding the communities that we serve.

REFLECTION ON THE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED SCHOLARLY VALUES

Our research is led by values of democratic voice, equity through reciprocity, social justice, community self-determination, and shared space for dialogue. These five IUPUI Office of Community Engagement scholarly values drive our understanding and practice of community-engaged activities.

Democratic voice is foundational in successfully exercising community-engaged research. We have found that recognizing every person's ideas, perspectives and thoughts are critical to fostering better communication and deeper relationships

Urban Education Studies doctoral students Latosha Rowley and Susan Kigamwa discuss their research.
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with the communities we serve. One of the key components of our community-engaged work is having opportunities to hear and actively listen to community voices about issues and solutions.

Latosha: In my recent inquiry study, IUPUI OCE staff and a local urban community center partnered to create a road map for a study to improve the center's services and programming. We worked together with an intentional focus on the goals and needs of improving the community center's programming. Through this collaborative partnership, the center's leadership actively participated in creating with us the survey and interview questions to seek valuable information from community partners. We brainstormed ideas with the center board members as well as staff and were able to experience the power of demo-

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cratic community voice. Our joint contribution in creating this tool was essential to support the community center leaders' needs for information. I conducted surveys with parents, caregivers, and other family members at the community center's Family Unity Night celebration. Their responses helped us examine experiences, strengths, and

challenges in the center's programming. Based on the feedback received from survey responders we improved the survey and provided opportunities for more community input and voice regarding the leaders' information needs.

Equity through reciprocity is recognizing that there exists a fair exchange of information. Historically, universities have been notorious for embracing a one-way, top-down approach with fixed research agendas for their community partnerships. The work of community-engaged research has a completely different approach that begins with understanding the people, the history of the community, their assets, and priorities. Understanding these key factors about communities helps to identify common areas of interest, and results in a win-win relationship.

Susan: An example of reciprocity of equity was demonstrated in the creation of a university-based theater company. It was formed to focus on Black diaspora theatre as an inspired vision of the Indianapolis community. The theater is focused on increasing affordable access to performing arts for the local community; and showing productions with themes, stories and actors that reflect Black experiences. This partnership with the university offers access to opportunities for arts-based student learning experiences in the community as well as evidence-based research strategies. The Black theatre initiative is a direct outcome inspired from community participation in the Indiana Avenue Cultural District's revitalization discussions. The rich history of Indianapolis' Indiana Avenue with Black culture is well understood and treasured, making this partnership opportunity an ideal connection.

Social justice guides our inquiry approach as we seek to ensure fair and just community-engaged research with a focus on the equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and social privileges.

Latosha: Social justice action is evident in our research with the IUPUI sponsored Girl Talk

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mentoring programming in two different middle schools in the Indianapolis Public School district. Our Girl Talk mentoring program serves to address social justice by supporting girls' self-efficacy and academic achievement in underserved student populations. The girls increase their knowledge and awareness of possible solutions to their school and life challenges as they successfully transition into high school, college, and careers.

The focus of the **community self-determination** value is evident when we prioritize partnerships that focus on the well-being of communities. An example of this kind of partnership is the Quality of Life plans developed by neighborhoods reflecting the priorities of residents, non-profits, schools, churches and other stakeholders in a community. Most Quality of Life plans provide a framework to address education, health, safety, workforce and economic development that aligns the university with the community's interests. Reflected in these plans are neighborhood assets, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. Communities in Central Indiana demonstrate self-determination consistently and send the message that they do not need external entities telling them what is needed in their own neighborhoods.

Susan: I have participated in grant writing partnerships where a community partner positioned themselves as lead applicants to ensure their needs could be fully met in alignment with their quality of life plan. To me this is a demonstration of their own clear-sighted ability to get what they need from the partnership.

A final value of community-engaged work is

the **shared space for dialogue** in a co-working relationship between the university and the community partners with a focus on diversity and building bridges for differences.

Latosha: Community conversations accomplished ways to maintain the culture and history of the neighborhood while meeting the community's needs. I had the opportunity to attend a community conversation event where community members and IUPUI staff engaged in dialogue about the social, historical, personal and organizational values of the local neighborhood. This community conversation was purposeful and allowed opportunities for all stakeholders to collaboratively rethink solutions together. Being present with community members, especially during community conversations is a powerful way to build mutually beneficial relationships between the community and the university (Born, 2012).

These values are supported by trust, a component that facilitates connecting with community partners in authentic and productive relationships. As these trusting relationships have continued to grow, we have had the privilege of participating, as well as witnessing opportunities to challenge, disrupt, and resist economic, social and racial inequity in our local communities.

REFLECTIONS

Examining community engagement through the prism of the Office of Community Engagement's scholarly values has been insightful and central for our professional growth and development. Reflecting on our research, we realize there will be challenges such as ambiguity and lack of structural support in the field. However, we can come alongside community to co-create rewarding and sustainable change.

Our experience as doctoral students in the Office of Community Engagement has given us opportunities to engage in inquiry mentored by veteran researchers to co-learn and navigate such challenges and gain deeper understanding of urban spaces as places of opportunity and transformation (Sutton and Kemp, 2011).

References

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