Project UNITED: 3-Years of Participatory Research

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Project UNITED is a NIH funded program awarded to:

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- College of Communication and Information Sciences
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To partner community and academic scholars to foster research addressing obesity issues in the Alabama Black Belt through Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR).
“Community-based participatory research (in health) is a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings” CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health…”

• Community Engaged Research Training Core  
  (Community Scholars)

• Community Engaged Academic Learner Core  
  (Academic Learners)

• Incubator Core  
  (Garden Project at Sunshine School and Home Sweet Home)

• Dissemination Core

• Community Advisory Board (CAB)
Evaluation

- Evaluators used a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures to provide formative and summative assessments for Project UNITED.

- Evaluators collaborated with core leaders to write SMART objectives and develop a comprehensive plan for analysis of program and outcome measures.
Evaluation Plan

- Evaluation plans typically mirror project work plan and follow a logic model.
Traditional evaluation plans also include standard metrics, like Kirkpatrick’s four-level hierarchy for training evaluation:

**Evaluation Level 1:** Reactions – measure of satisfaction the materials, modality, etc. Did participants like the training and feel it was useful and on target?

**Evaluation Level 2:** Learning – degree to which knowledge was acquired, skills were added or improved, etc. To what degree did participants learn objectives-related content/skills/perspectives?

**Evaluation Level 3:** Behavior – transfer of learning to performance. To what extent are the participants now applying training related knowledge/skills/attitudes to their daily lives?

**Evaluation Level 4:** Results – extent to which intended training outcomes were achieved?
In CBPR, unexpected situations may arise that challenge conventional methods of evaluation.

- For example, Garden Project at Sunshine School brought disparate groups together to work on a school garden project
Structured Interview

• Garden Project at Sunshine School
  • Evaluators used structured interviews to uncover challenges

SCRIPT for
Project UNITED – DCGP

Hello. My name is ___________ and I am working with Lea Yerby and the Project UNITED team to gather information about the Garden Project at Sunshine School for programmatic evaluation. The reason for my call today is to ask you a few questions about your specific experiences with this project at this point in the process.

Do you have a few minutes to discuss these questions?

  If NO, ask for a specific day/time to follow-up.
  If YES, proceed.

1. Before you became involved in this project, were you familiar with the term: Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)?

   If YES, proceed
   If NO, skip to question 3

2. Where did you first encounter the term “CBPR”? (Literature, grant writing, research, conference, committee, studies/education, etc.?)


4. Has your understanding of CBPR changed during the time you have been involved with this project?

   If YES, please describe.

5. On a scale from 1-6, please rate your level of satisfaction with the following aspects of the Garden Project at Sunshine School. DCGP:
Challenges to CBPR

Challenges with Garden Project

• Lack of consensus regarding purpose
• Poor/Inconsistent Communication
• Lackluster response to call for Gardening Committee
• Withdrawal of academic PI
• Financial issues
  • Rumors regarding closure
  • School focus on other priorities
Challenges to CBPR

Lessons Learned from Garden Project

• Establish clear and consistent communication
• Agree upon preferred method(s) of communication in advance
• Clarify expectations of all partners
• Build consensus around central purpose(s) of the project
• Foster trust and cultural sensitivity among all parties
Challenges to Cooperation

• Poster presented at International Symposium on Minority Health and Health Disparities

**The Partners**

- **Who:** Dr. LaJuan Hutchinson
- **What:** Assistant Professor, Department of Physical, Education and Athletic Training, The University of West Alabama
- **Where:** Livingston, Sumter County, AL

- **Who:** Dr. Claudia Bissell
- **What:** Endowed Assistant Professor, Department of Public Health, School of Public Health, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- **Where:** Birmingham, Jefferson County, AL

- **Who:** Mark Shreves
- **What:** Assistant Professor, School of Public Health, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- **Where:** Birmingham, Jefferson County, AL

- **Who:** Mathew Shreves
- **What:** Resident Physician, Division of Emergency Medicine, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- **Where:** Birmingham, Jefferson County, AL

- **Who:** Stephen Fifolt
- **What:** Assistant Physician, Division of Emergency Medicine, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- **Where:** Birmingham, Jefferson County, AL

- **Who:** Jason Hites
- **What:** Assistant Professor, School of Public Health, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- **Where:** Birmingham, Jefferson County, AL

- **Who:** Florence Jones
- **What:** Assistant Professor, School of Public Health, University of Alabama at Birmingham
- **Where:** Birmingham, Jefferson County, AL

**The Challenges**

- **Project Beginnings**
  - Initially, DCGP and Sunshine School administration were introduced through Project UNITED personnel as Dr. Hutchinson was not yet on the project.
  - DCGP relies primarily on volunteers for building school gardens. The build was to take place during the summer when school personnel were in-service, making it difficult for DCGP and Sunshine School to find a build date that would work for both of them.
  - The location of the build was also an issue, as location near a source of water was a priority, and the space preferred by DCGP was used as bus parking during Sunshine School's football season.
  - After much discussion and with some help from Project UNITED personnel, the build was completed several weeks after the proposed date.

- **Obstacles in Communication**
  - Although the contacts at Sunshine School had offered their primary contact information to DCGP and Project UNITED personnel, responses were often slow or forgotten due to the busy schedules of the Sunshine School contacts. This made planning activities or overseeing the project difficult for DCGP volunteers, most of whom lived an hour away from the school.

- **Unforeseen Complications**
  - Sunshine School was unable to find a gardening committee that satisfied the DCGP's requirements. This put the garden at risk during the school's winter break when there was no one to care for it.
  - Dr. Hutchinson collected pre-test data during the Fall of 2013, but then had to withdraw from the project entirely, leaving it with no Academic PI.
  - Due to budget constraints in Hale County, there were unconfirmed rumors that Sunshine School would be closed, leaving the project in limbo until an official decision was made.
  - Issues at the school required the principal and others to shift their focus from the garden to other matters.

**What We Learned**

- **Deviation from the Project UNITED Plan**
  - The Project UNITED structure was intended to partner one or more community organizations with an academic or medical research PI. Together they would determine expectations, roles, and objectives for their planned project. This project partnered two community organizations, only adding a research PI at a later point. This deviation played a key role in some of the obstacles our community partners faced.
  - If a research PI had been involved throughout the project, they could have served as a mediator for many of the issues the partners encountered. Without strong ties to either organization, this party would have been able to provide objective recommendations to both groups.

- **Community Organizations Must Be Culturally Sensitive, Too**
  - CBPR often focuses on the relationship between researchers and communities. In fact, it is important to teach community organizations from different backgrounds how to be sensitive to their community partners as well.
  - DCGP had an established system for building and implementing their garden program in Tuscaloosa, AL. They found it difficult to adjust their usual system to meet the needs of an isolated rural school.
  - Sunshine School administration wanted a garden program, but had not fully appreciated the time and resources a garden would take. As a result, they often expected more from DCGP volunteers than was possible.

- **Establish Communication Expectations Early**
  - Early discussions with the Sunshine School contacts assured us that phone or e-mail would be the best way to reach them. After several months of slow or no responses, DCGP requested help from Project UNITED personnel. At a meeting with Sunshine School, all parties were told that visiting the school in person was the best means of communication with administration. If this had been established at the beginning of the project, regularly scheduled meetings would have taken place to allow for open communication between both organizations.

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Collaborations

- To expand reach and build capacity for CBPR, Project UNITED solicited proposals from teams of Academic Learners and Community Scholars

- Competitive CBPR sub-grant process
Collaborations

• One of the challenges with CBPR is the real or perceived lack of rigorous evaluation

• Project UNITED team hosted a Proposal Writing Workshop for Academic Learners and Community Scholars

• Evaluators conducted a session on the value and importance of programmatic evaluation
Collaborations

• Four teams formulated projects

• Three teams submitted proposals for consideration

• Team selected for funding was Home Sweet Home
  • Strength of application
  • Evaluation-driven project
  • Clear evidence of collaboration
References


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