



STUDENT REFLECTIONS:

Community-Based Research as a Vehicle for Competency-Based Learning

Student Contributors

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Summer, 2015



Building stronger, healthier, happier communities through
community-based **research**, **teaching**, and **action**.

Project Background

During the spring of 2015, Professors Jessica Lucero and Jenifer Evers, along with Dr. David Parker from the Utah Labor Commission's Division of Fair Housing led USU social work students in the inaugural Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI) Annual Survey. The community-based research project aimed to assess Utahn's general knowledge and attitudes concerning the Fair Housing Law. Results from the study were used to tailor educational outreach efforts at the Division of Fair Housing and have been presented to regional and national audiences.

After building a relationship with our community partner, Dr. Parker, students in Professors Lucero and Evers's classes were trained on three data collection procedures: (1) neighborhood canvassing, (2) social media, and (3) community/religious organization contact. Neighborhood canvassing efforts included face-to-face interactions with residents living in targeted communities throughout the state based on resident income, rental tenure, and racial composition. The second strategy involved "sharing" the survey on social media websites, such as Facebook in hopes of including more rural parts of the state. The final effort required students to contact two different community/religious organizations and ask them to distribute the survey via listserv/email list.

After data collection was complete, students were trained in data analysis, which paved the way for data-driven educational outreach in the community. Students worked in groups to coordinate a community outreach presentation that focused on educating the community group on the importance of fair housing law and their rights under the law. These educational presentations informed more than 150 community members, and allowed students to showcase their emergent research skills and passion for helping the community.

The social work profession has strong roots in macro practice. As social workers, we recognize the necessity of engaging, assessing, intervening, and evaluating at various scales (micro, mezzo, and macro) in order to bring about positive change for individuals and communities. Despite our profession's commitment to these ideals, macro-level social work educators are concerned about the diminishing interest among students and schools of social work in providing quality macro-level curriculum (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). Involving students in large-scale, community-based research projects such as the Fair Housing Project, provides a unique opportunity to ignite passion and commitment to macro social work. Professors Lucero, Evers, and Roark have outlined the learning benefits associated with the Fair Housing Project [elsewhere](#), but the following collection of student essays highlights personal narratives that connect the Fair Housing Project to growth in key competency areas for macro social workers.



Gaining a Professional Social Work Identity

Caroline Lorenzen recalls her experience with door-to-door canvassing and presenting the fair housing law to the community. Caroline discusses her transformation from a competitive student to a compassionate social worker, after realizing this research wasn't about getting a good grade, but improving the knowledge and lives of her fellow community members.

Competition is rooted in everything I do as a university student. There are so many of us pursuing the same objectives that I feel as though I'm in a constant frenzy to stand out from the crowd. Receiving the highest test score and obtaining the desired club position are an expectation I have given to myself. Scoring a B on an assignment is unheard of. In group assignments I take the lead, and like an overzealous Siberian husky leading a pack of sled dogs, I drag an already overburdened sled across the finish line—in first place. As much as I try to convince myself that this academic insanity is a noble and altruistic step in furthering my education and strengthening myself as a future social worker, much of my motivation is selfish. I want to be the best. Seeing my name on certificates makes the hard work seem worthwhile. My “mad dog” style of success has done me well so far. I never lose. Even if I did, the only one hurt by the loss would be me...right?

Taking a social work course which is rooted directly in research and community outreach has stopped me in my tracks. When tasked with the objective of collecting surveys from a quaint old neighborhood, I revved up my engines and told my research partner with enthusiasm that we were going to get the most surveys out of all the teams out door knocking that day. I stood in the cold, impatiently knocking on the door of a retired resident to collect a survey. The gentleman had spent the last hour filling it out and I was getting impatient to collect it from him. He informed me he needed more time—he was writing as fast as his shaking hands could. I suddenly felt ashamed. Why was I doing this? Was it just to get a good grade? With each opened door and survey completed by another generous resident of our community, I realized that this assignment was bigger than me. The research we conducted to discover the attitudes and knowledge of Utah residents on fair housing law wasn't just another A on a transcript—it was an opportunity to improve the lives of Utah residents and prevent housing discrimination. The information I learned in class finally felt real to me. The case studies represented real people and I found myself absorbing my readings with greater intention.

As we finished our research it was time to share what we had found. I presented our findings to a group of student employees working for university housing. As I excitedly explained what fair housing law meant for them, I noticed that one of the employees was sleeping—in the front row. I wasn't mad at her. I understood; she felt disconnected from the social issue I was presenting.

I was just hired for what feels like my first “real” job. A job in social work, supervising summer activities for foster kids with disabilities. I am ready to perform well not only for myself, but for the children that may benefit from my good work. The stakes are higher and in all honesty I'm quite terrified for what lies ahead. I know that whatever happens I'm still learning. I hope that



as I witness people's lives made better through my dedication to professional excellence, that I will be further motivated to continue educating myself in a more meaningful way for myself and for others.

-Caroline Lorenzen

Recognizing the Engagement of Diversity in Community Practice

Marisa Andrews reflects on her increased awareness and higher regard for diverse populations as she discusses the multifaceted community members she encountered and surveyed. Marisa's recognition for privileges and powers that allow her to be a valuable asset to her community is demonstrated through her recollection of neighborhood canvassing and outreach to minority organizations.

While participating in this project, I gained a greater awareness and appreciation of diversity in culture, religion, and geographic areas. At times, we must actually be a participant in an experience in order to understand what a concept really refers to. On an individual level, this research allowed me to experience what working with diverse populations actually means, and validated that oppression exists. We contacted and communicated with various churches and organizations throughout the state to advocate for their opinions and knowledge. There were religious and social organizations that I was neither familiar, nor affiliated with on a personal level, and I was not aware of the diverse organizations that existed in the rural parts of the state. I felt empathy for minority populations and made an effort to reach out to these rural areas, wanting to represent as many people as possible. Society as a whole often assumes that specific populations, such as ethnic minorities or those of low socioeconomic status, aren't competent or concerned with issues of law and social progress. Biases exist against the marginalized and minority populations.

It was interesting to note the engagement of people from various religious and social groups who felt appreciated as we advocated for their attitudes regarding fair housing. From religious groups in rural southern Utah to Hispanic congregations in urban areas, people accepted and were engaged with our efforts of instigating conversation on fair housing. It was evident that even participants valued diversity. While canvassing one neighborhood, a woman not only filled out a survey, but eagerly directed us to additional streets and suggested specific houses to contact in order for our data to be representative of diverse populations. A plethora of positive responses came from participants throughout the state eager to voice their opinions and attitudes.

My own introspection occurred as I recognized my privileges and power that comes simply because of my race, social class, and geographic area I live. I felt the ethical responsibility to engage with those from diverse backgrounds to advocate for their opinions. I became more sensitive to the culture of others and the oppression that groups face due to discrimination and underrepresentation as I conversed with participants and interpreted data. There is a dual



responsibility of a researcher to both the individual and broader society as a whole to ensure that all dignity and worth is represented as policy is established and enforced. As a social worker, I must assist protected and vulnerable classes in realizing the power and privileges that they have, recognizing that I must embrace and strive to better understand the diverse backgrounds of various populations. This occurs through educational outreach to specific populations, regarding topics such as fair housing, in a manner that is tailored to their collective needs and culture. In the future, it is essential that my practice and attitudes are congruent with the values of diversity and individual worth through engaging with and advocating for all protected classes.

-Marisa Andrews

Individual Empowerment to Advance Human Rights and Social Justice

Patricia Johnson discusses her experience with gathering data and implementing the research findings. From raising awareness about important issues to giving a voice to those who had been and continue to be discriminated against, Patricia is now able to recognize her ability to provide assistance to her community as a future social worker.

While gathering data through door-to-door canvassing, my partner and I met a man who was fixing his front window. We asked what had happened, and he replied that a neighbor had thrown a rock through his window. He told us how his landlord had refused to fix it, and has repeatedly refused to fix leaks in their ceiling, problems with their furnace, and other repairs that have been needed in their town house. He has been discriminated against over and over again in this home, and he feels this is happening because he is Latino. We were able to give this man and his family a voice with our survey as well as resources for reporting this discrimination. We now, due to the data we have gathered, have the ability to take this a few steps further and advocate for human rights in housing throughout Utah.

With the data from our Fair Housing project, we were able to create a presentation that was applicable to our community. With the data we collected in our community, we are now capable of understanding what is generally known and what is not clearly understood about the Fair Housing Act. This information will allow us to teach what we feel is most pressing in our community outreach. By doing so, we will be able to increase awareness of the Fair Housing Act as well as the discrimination that is occurring in Utah. This information will be used further in educational outreach throughout the state. As more people learn about these issues, the amount of discrimination in housing in Utah may be decreased, thus advancing the condition of human rights in our state.

This project has helped me to see what social workers can do for the community. I have been empowered by being a part of this project because it has shown me that I really can make a difference in this world. As a future social worker, I have the ability to continue to advocate for social justice and human rights. The Fair Housing Project has helped me to further understand



the immense amount of discrimination that still exists in this country. I now have a greater recognition of the importance of defending the rights of those who are being discriminated against, both in my social work career as well as in my own personal life.

-Patricia Johnson

Understanding the Importance of Conducting Research in Order to Effectively Practice Social Work

Jorri Falslev came to realize the importance of research in social work after seeing the impact the fair housing research had on her community and on her development as a social worker. This realization is portrayed through her gained knowledge in reporting fair housing discrimination, as well as her reflection and application to past research experience with refugees.

One of the things that first drew me to social work when I was exploring possible careers was how the profession is so firmly grounded in practice and helping real people. Everything that we do in this field is geared towards actually accomplishing something with our clients; we are driven by results and progress. This focus on real changes, however, also means that we as social workers have a need and an obligation to conduct and rely on research in our work. This is a connection I have come to understand much better as I've had the opportunity to participate in social work-focused research projects in my undergraduate career. The fair housing research project demonstrated to me the importance of integrating research and practice in social work.

At the start of the project, I didn't know anything about the fair housing law or have any idea what people in Utah knew about it. If I had been asked at that point to advocate for someone experiencing housing discrimination or design an educational outreach to help social work clients understand their rights, I would have been at a total loss. Because I did not yet have a foundation in research on the topic, I was not ready to engage in any kind of effective social work practice in the fair housing arena. Over the course of the project this semester, I have had a chance to engage with individuals and community organizations and view actual data that tells me what they understand and what they don't. This information is what gives me the ability and the motivation to act to create change that can improve the lives of people at risk. The educational presentation I participated in with a group of fellow students is an example. With our new understanding of fair housing based in our research, we were able to educate people in positions to use that information to benefit vulnerable populations in asserting their rights. This part of the project was especially meaningful to me because we were able to present to a community committee concerned with helping refugees in Cache Valley. Over the past school year, I've had the chance to be involved in volunteer and research opportunities connected with refugees, so seeing how our work can benefit that population was especially exciting for me.



As my classmates and I move forward as professional social workers, I am sure that we'll have many experiences like this one, where knowledge and research become essential to effectively practice with our clients. I've already seen how much being involved with research on a topic can broaden a person's understanding of certain populations or issues that need the services social work offers, both through my experience with the fair housing project and the opportunity I've had to engage in research with refugee populations here in this area. In short, we don't know what we don't know until we explore it, and until we engage in research to learn about what we need to do as social workers, we simply cannot be effective in our task. The connection between research and practice is something that will never change, and the understanding of it that I've gained by participating in this project will be a great asset to me in my future career as a professional social worker.

-Jorri Falslev

Developing Professional Engagement with Organizations and Communities

Matthew Edrington discusses his development of being able to appropriately and professionally address organizations and communities, not only through personal commitment and involvement, but also by asking people to take action themselves. Matthew cites this engagement as successful through individual contact and social media efforts as he reflects on the survey online outreach to more rural parts of the state.

I learned the importance of positive engagement with organizations and communities while working on the Utah Fair Housing research project. Talking to people is a personal strength of mine. I can hold a conversation with almost anyone, and I can get them to laugh and have a good time. Talking with someone is one thing, asking them to do something is quite another. I spent one summer attempting to sell satellite TV door to door. I was the worst at it. I could talk to people and hold their attention for hours if I needed to, but when it came down to asking them to buy my product, I failed. Working on the Utah Fair Housing research project helped me to move beyond conversational engagement with people to a more productive engagement that led to a desired outcome.

I had been assigned to find and reach out to a community organization in northern Utah. In order to provide a broader geographical sampling, my class was divided up to reach out to different parts of the state. Our purpose for contacting different community groups was to survey the people who either work in or frequent their organizations. I had tried to reach several organizations and was met only with answering machines, and none of the organizations returned my calls. I persisted, however, and got a hold of the food pantry in Garland, Utah. The woman I talked with was delightful. I was able to articulate what our research and survey was about. She asked a couple of questions, and when I asked her if she would send the survey to the people on her email list, she was willing to do so. My purpose wasn't to just talk about this project; it was to get the survey out to people and help get results.



If I had merely given her information and didn't ask for some sort of action on her part, I would have failed in my desire to help with this research project. Because of this experience, I learned two valuable aspects of engagement. First to be proactive in my efforts, and second, to not be afraid to ask others to take specific action.

In our technological world, you need more than just human-to-human engagement—you have to be able to engage the social media world. We launched a social media campaign with our surveys for the Utah fair housing laws project. Most of our completed surveys came from our Facebook efforts. This project has helped me to see new and innovative ways to engage people. Through social media, we can now reach thousands and even millions of people. When we combine positive engagement with social media while asking for specific action, we can change the world. It has been an absolute joy to be a part of this project and to hear how our efforts of engaging the community both in person and on social media have started the wheels of change.

-Matthew Edrington

Assessing Research and Applying Findings to Help Community Members

Deborah Vernon examines the assessment side of approaching organizations and communities after being able to study the findings herself. Deborah even discusses her own ideas and strategies to take as a future social worker in order to prevent housing discrimination in her home community of Moab.

The Fair Housing project has provided an opportunity to increase my knowledge about the Fair Housing Law and engage people in my community at a micro and macro-level. This project has also provided me with valuable information about the public's general knowledge and thoughts about the Fair Housing Law, which protected classes are in need of protecting, and who they need to contact if they have been discriminated against. Along with this information, it has also granted me the opportunity to assess the need for an educational outreach program to educate Utah residents on the Fair Housing Law.

My own knowledge about the Fair Housing Law needed to increase before engaging at the micro-level of neighborhood canvassing. One thing I found interesting about housing discrimination was that people don't recognize whether they have been discriminated against because discrimination has become so covert. Housing discrimination isn't exposed with obvious signs like it was many years ago, it has become subtle and difficult to recognize. The findings from the survey indicated that most people don't believe they have ever been discriminated against, when in reality, many people may have experienced discrimination and don't recognize it, because of its subtlety.

While participating in the neighborhood canvassing and talking with people in my community, it was apparent that people knew the law existed, however, they had no idea who it applied to, what a protected class was, who to contact, and most of them felt they had never been

discriminated against. The results from the survey have shown that many residents of Utah are not knowledgeable about the Fair Housing Law, who the protected classes are, or who to contact if they have been discriminated against.

Participating in the project and assessing the results has allowed myself to view the findings from a macro-level, in order to strategize what information would be beneficial in an educational outreach program and how to get the information out to the residents of Utah. One strategy to get the information on the Fair Housing Law out to residents would be to educate organizations who assist Utah residents with housing. These organizations would be able to educate their clients about the Fair Housing Law by holding their own educational workshops. Another strategy would be to provide brochures or pamphlets located at several organizations/businesses around the community, which would increase the knowledge about the Fair Housing Law, along with information of who to contact if they think they have been discriminated against.

The knowledge that I have gained from this project will enhance my practice as a social worker to assist my clients who may encounter housing discrimination. The connections that I have developed through this project will also enhance my practice, by being able to refer clients to the appropriate organizations for further assistance if they experience discrimination. A goal as a future social worker would be to educate Utah residents about the Fair Housing Law, and attempt to eliminate housing discrimination in Utah completely.

-Deborah Vernon

Intervening in the Community to Implement Effective Prevention Tactics and Strategies

Juliette Dobson reflects upon the analysis of the research findings and presenting the important issue to a multicultural and diversity group at USU, allowing herself to recognize the relevance of this law after seeing community members willingly participate in the education of others. Juliette also discusses the population of Native Americans, and helping them gain increased representation in their discriminatory housing experiences.

When we began this project, there was a lack of knowledge regarding Fair Housing among my peers and myself. Because of this deficiency, we sought out more information and how to advocate for marginalized populations. Although I have great concern about many populations, my focus was directed toward the Native American population. This population has been discriminated against for several decades and has felt underrepresented due to a lack of advocacy. With the encouragement from various social agencies and religion institutions, participants completed a qualitative survey and voiced their experiences of housing discrimination.

As the data portrayed, experiences and attitudes towards housing discrimination were



incongruent in our society. The experiences of our participants suggested Fair Housing laws are greatly relevant and the repercussions of discrimination effect social functioning of the marginalized individuals. Secondly, our research suggested that empathy and understanding effected attitudes of the participants. We found that humanization occurred through education, as participants understood they were not exclusively combating discrimination alone. Evidence of this was seen in a community outreach presentation that was given to the multicultural and diversity group at Utah State University. Once audience members understood this communal injustice had occurred, we witnessed a bond form among the group as they shared personal narratives about discrimination. This conversation led to what classes they would be protected under, how they could stop this discrimination in the future, and how participants could help educate others. This discussion brought about awareness and knowledge about the Fair Housing Laws, which could be disseminated to their friends, family, and other members of their communities.

I greatly value the opportunity to advocate for diverse populations and use my education experiences to improve the quality of life in others. Furthermore, I appreciate my deeper understanding on Fair Housing and the impact it creates to marginalized populations. With the experience, I was able to apply concepts and theories of macro social work and education to achieve a greater role in influencing social policy. Additionally, I was pleased when the State of Utah passed a legislative bill adding LGBTQ individuals as members of the protected class. Being involved in various roles in advocacy work and education has created numerous views in others that can combat discrimination, not just in Fair Housing, but in all other aspects in the social environment.

-Juliette Dobson