Benefits of Introducing Community-Based Research

The community-based research project allows students to engage with the local community in a meaningful, yet academic way in that there is additional learning happening outside of the classroom that the professor is not directly responsible for teaching. This sort of experience forces students to develop important life skills, such as team building, leadership development, and written and oral communication.

Community-based projects also put students face-to-face with different types of people; ones that they may not certainly encounter on a college campus or other aspects of their lives. Learning to work with people of different socioeconomic, cultural or academic backgrounds should be an important part of their undergraduate career. In addition, while a course that has a community-based project may attract a certain type of student (one who is interested in engaging with the local community), it may be the first experience some students have with a community organization. For some, this experience may be the starting point for other meaningful relationships with local nonprofit organizations during their collegiate experience and perhaps well beyond that. Offering a community-based learning experience in Economics classes, in which males typically represent the majority, can be a way to encourage community service among males during their collegiate career (who have lower rates of community engagement).

The local organization also has much to gain, assuming that students produce high quality projects that are developed to meet a need. In fact, when we first approached the organizations, we were surprised at how interested they were in working with us, and quickly realized that they have many ideas but do not have the resources and time to get them accomplished. Thus, our students are filling an important need by providing them the necessary labor and expertise to complete a project. In addition, Economics concentrators have strong quantitative skills that can be put to good use. We have found that local nonprofit organizations often have great data, but do not always have the capacity to analyze their data. As a result of their projects, students realize how valuable their quantitative skills are in the real world, and are able to hone and market these skills more effectively.

Finally, both the instructor and the university can benefit from building strong relationships with local organizations. For example, instructors develop a deeper understanding of what local practitioners do, which provides the instructor with specific examples to incorporate in lectures and class discussions. In addition, the students’ experiences at local organizations often provide more credibility to what is being taught in the classroom. By working with local organizations, instructors may gain access to data that they did not know existed, which can benefit the instructors’ future scholarship.