

Academic-Community Partnerships to Reduce Inequities for Adult Learners

Synergy and Social Change

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Barriers to college completion include cost, insufficient preparation, poor study skills, and adjustment difficulties (Brock, 2010). More extensive among adult learners, these challenges include family responsibilities, job commitments, and inflexible course scheduling. In addition, many adult learners experience anxieties about their learning abilities and interactions with younger students when returning to the classroom after extended periods away (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001) attribute many of these barriers to the systematic neglect of adult learners throughout higher education. Policy decisions, programming, the classroom environment, and funding opportunities all disenfranchise adult learners. This reflection describes an academic-community partnership aiming to counteract these structural and systemic barriers.

The Boston Medical Center (BMC) Vital Village Network is a collaborative of community residents, medical professionals, schools, and other

community-based organizations synergistically acting to improve the well-being of children and families. Many community residents engaged in BMC Vital Village Network are adult learners. A needs assessment, conducted among 129 residents in 2014, revealed 51%

had ambitions of completing degrees but deferred enrollment due to competing priorities. Three fourths (75%) reported they would pursue further education if they could obtain degree credit for community service. Therefore, BMC Vital Village Network began seeking partnerships focused on educational opportunities that would benefit both individuals and communities. These efforts culminated in a meeting with

Urban College of Boston that revealed synergy in mission, strategy, and target population and the introduction of a practice-based community advocacy course at the college in fall 2016.

Urban College of Boston is a 2-year college established to provide opportunities for postsecondary education and professional advancement to those traditionally underserved by higher education. The

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average age of students is 35, nearly all (98%) have full-time jobs, over half (58%) have been out of school for more than 10 years, 67% speak English as a second language, and 90% are students of color. Urban College of Boston is explicit in its mission to transform lives and enrich communities. The college has established several successful community partnerships focused on poverty and homelessness, child care, early childhood education, and a range of other topics. The curricular programming, academic-community partnerships, admissions policies, and diverse student body all reflect the commitment to enriching communities by improving access to higher education for adult learners.

A practice-based community advocacy course was modeled after the Peer-Advocate Action Roundtable (PAR), whose mission is to empower parents and caregivers to be effective change agents in their communities. PAR grew out of a collaboration between Medical-Legal Partnership–Boston (MLPB), Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), and BMC Vital Village Network. As we began teaching advocacy skills, the peer advocates felt there was an overemphasis on theory and a lack of practice-based learning opportunities. In response to this need, MLPB developed the *GRASP* tool (Goals, Research/Rules, Allies/Adversaries, Strategic Story, Power Players). The *GRASP* approach provided generalizable structure to the complex, nuanced process of advocacy among groups and across sectors. The simple language also makes advocacy feel accessible to individuals with little formal education or limited exposure to the process.

However, our peer advocates felt that there were limited opportunities to apply newly acquired skills so the steps from learning *GRASP* to effective advocacy felt too vast. The peer advocates were also interested in moving beyond traditional financial incentives and developing a fund to aid their educational and professional growth. Similar to our peer advocates, we anticipated many students at Urban College of Boston have engaged in unrecognized and unrewarded advocacy efforts. An opportunity for students to earn college credit, enrich the community, and enhance their long-term professional development is a deeply meaningful experience. We were confident that using the *GRASP* tool to create a practice-based community advocacy course would equip students with the tools,

resources, and strategies to continue serving as effective change agents.

The *GRASP* tool served as the foundation for the 15-week fall course. Working in four groups, students used the tool to design an advocacy project on their topic of choice, designing detailed policy and practice agendas focused on adolescent mental health, immigration, homelessness among elders, and children with special needs. The course intentionally illuminated the connections between community advocacy, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. Social change efforts begin to feel overwhelming and unattainable when individuals are not grounded in who they are and what they are capable of achieving. During the early weeks of the course, many students did not identify as advocates even though they successfully use these skills to navigate daily life. Students slowly began to recognize this was a talent they already possessed. *GRASP* provides structure to a process that many students employ to survive a world of systemic injustice. During the last week of the course, students were invited to share reflections on the semester. One student expressed, “I learned that I have more to offer than I realized.” Another student’s self-efficacy increased significantly over the course of the semester. He proudly exclaimed, “I thought I had to be the president to make a difference. I now know I have the power to make change.” A student who completed a project on children with special needs has already identified an opportunity to apply the knowledge she gained. She explained, “[This class] made me more proactive. I am starting a moms’ group for families dealing with disabilities.” The course unlocked hidden potential and exposed students to the limitless possibilities of advocacy.

The 15-week spring course presented an opportunity to partner with three community-based organizations advocating for reform in education, juvenile justice, and welfare. Students chose a topic and interviewed a representative from the organization to learn more about its advocacy efforts. Working in groups, they used this information to design a *GRASP* project and then shared projects with the organization mid-semester to obtain feedback and suggestions. The course also emphasized the importance and intricacies of relationship building. Students raved about the in-class exercises that demonstrated how the intersections of

race, class, gender, place of origin, lived experience, and other identities shape human interaction and drive advocacy efforts. These brief exercises equipped students with the skills to forge meaningful interpersonal relationships and successful partnerships with organizations. As previously mentioned, Urban College of Boston prides itself in the diversity of its student body. Unlike many students in the fall course new to the field, several students in the spring course had extensive experience in human services. They provided valuable personal and professional expertise to the organizations. One organization shared, “The students we worked with were passionate [advocates]. They dove into their topic with keen interest and brought both personal and professional insights to the work.” The organizations were eager to implement the students’ ideas and encouraged their continued involvement with the organization.

Teaching an advocacy course in a nontraditional undergraduate setting presents unique opportunities for social change. The majority of students have daily encounters with systemic injustice and their experiences are often the strategic stories critical to the success of *GRASP*. One student appeared on several media outlets and was invited to testify at a hearing at the Massachusetts State House. She was moved by this opportunity to confront injustice by sharing her lived experiences.

In fall 2017, we piloted a two-semester community advocacy certificate program at Urban College of Boston. During the first semester, students work in groups to collaborate with an organization on an advocacy project. The second semester involves an intensive practicum at the same organization where students will apply their advocacy skills in real time. This expanded academic-community partnership between BMC Vital Village Network and Urban College of Boston is a powerful strategy to build community capacity and promote social change. Through this collaboration, adult learners have increased access to meaningful civic engagement opportunities, organizations affiliated with BMC Vital Village Network are expanding their capacity to further their cause, and Urban College of Boston is continuing its mission of transforming lives, enriching communities, and reducing educational inequities for adult learners.

Academic-community partnerships involving adult learners are an underutilized opportunity for social change. Academic institutions and community-based organizations often have complimentary missions and forming mutually enriching partnerships allow both entities to deepen their impact. Adult educators can optimize academic-community partnerships by cultivating an educational experience that extends beyond the four walls of the classroom. They have the power to equip adult learners with the knowledge, resources, and skills to meaningfully contribute to social change. Adult learners experience significant personal and professional growth by engaging in academic-community partnerships that demand innovation, creativity, and perseverance. Collaborations counteracting the barriers impeding success for adult learners are powerful mechanisms for advancing educational equity and achieving social justice.

Authors’ Note

Kimberly Byrd is now at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

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